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// unmasked recap //

// Unmarked is the sequel to Unmasked, so I strongly encourage anyone who has stumbled across this novel to take a look at Unmasked first. If you are not so inclined, here is an in-depth summary (or recap, for those of you who need a refresher on the events of the first novel), that will help you understand the events occurring in Unmarked.

// SPOILERS AHEAD //

The story begins with a grey tom sitting atop a log and looking into the distance. He waits for the return of a hunting patrol led by Heatherfur, his loyal deputy. As he waits, a new figure emerges – Finchwatcher, his medicine cat, who tells him she knows of his true feelings for Heatherfur and that the Clan must always come first. Over the course of their conversation, the sky begins to darken until the entire moon is swallowed up in a lunar eclipse and Finchwatcher, in horror, realizes that StarClan warned them of this night. In the darkness, they are attacked by two traitors and Sootstar manages to kill both, but not before they take Finchwatcher's life. Hearing the sounds of battle, the MoorClan leader dashes off to his camp.

When he arrives, he scents all three of the Clans – MoorClan, RockClan, and SeaClan. Aware that something is not quite right, Sootstar follows the scents to the High Rocks, the Clans' Gathering Place, and finds a mass of cats gathered. Among them are Rushclaw of SeaClan, Robinfang of RockClan, and Heatherfur of MoorClan. The MoorClan leader is caught eavesdropping and dragged out of hiding by the rebels. Heatherfur explains that the rebellion must go through and overthrow the structures of the Old Clan Life because of how weak the Clans have become as a result of their love and kindness towards each other. Before the eyes of all those gathered, she kills Sootstar.

Centuries later, this story is played out by Nightkit, Flamekit, and Cinderkit, who play the roles of Robinfang, Heatherfur, and

Sootstar, respectively. During this reenactment of the Masked Uprising, Nightkit is distracted by his thoughts of what lies outside of their Clan, DarkClan. The kits are chastised by Snowdapple, a caretaker, when Flamekit attacks Nightkit and knocks him off of a High Rock. Dawnstar, the leader of DarkClan, sees this and cuffs the caretaker for attempting to prevent the kits from reenacting the uprising; this is the first evidence of how poorly the caretakers are treated and how even a small gesture can spell out treason.

The moment Dawnstar leaves, Hailwatcher approaches the kits, offering to tell them a story. Nightkit, always eager to hear the truth-teller's stories, listens raptly as the spotted tom picks up where the kits left off in their reenactment, telling of Robinfang's appointment to truth-teller status and her new name, Robinwatcher. As the story comes to a close, Dawnstar calls a Clan meeting and the three kits are apprenticed: Cinderpaw to Marshclaw, Flamepaw to Rowanstorm, and Nightpaw to Hailwatcher. Nightpaw's white-rimmed eyes set him apart from his siblings, earning him the place of the truth-teller's apprentice.

That same day Hailwatcher takes Nightpaw to MoorClan territory and tells him of MoorClan's history, the purpose of the guardians of truth (guarding the truth-teller at all times), and explains why Nightpaw in particular was picked to be his apprentice. Putting ideas of greatness into his mind, Hailwatcher ensures that his apprentice has the foundation of loyalty to DarkClan firmly in place. As the truth-teller's apprentice, however, Nightpaw is not allowed to speak to others about his training and the tom finds himself slightly jealous of Cinderpaw and Flamepaw.

For the next half moon, Nightpaw is made to clean dens as part of his training; this is so he can learn the value of obedience. He, however, does not realize this and becomes frustrated with the lack of time he is spending with Hailwatcher. When patching the nursery, he becomes aggravated with the kits; Sedgecloud snaps at him to be careful and, when Nightpaw retaliates, he realizes that the caretakers cower before him.

After the half moon passes, Hailwatcher takes Nightpaw out to RockClan's old camp in the forest and tells him the story of Milkfeather, a caretaker who disobeyed a leader's direct orders and

paid the price for it. Within the tale, Dawnkit and Sandkit, two of Milkfeather's charges, are made to watch a bloody deputy race. Believing the sight unsuitable for the two young she-cats, the caretaker draws Sandkit away first. Before she can grab Dawnkit, she is caught and put to death by Redclaw.

Understanding the value of obedience, Nightpaw is allowed to join the other apprentices for training. He finds he is no good at the hunting crouch and Rowanstorm and Marshclaw are particularly harsh with him. Spiderthorn, the guardian present during training, assures him that his skills will grow. Nightpaw realizes he and Spiderthorn look somewhat alike, though he is much smaller and more awkwardly built, and wishes he could be like his guardian.

Upon his return to the camp, Nightpaw finds himself in the nursery where he tells his first story to the kits – that of Acornstar, a tom who practiced day and night to become the best warrior he could be after his mentor gave up on him and, in the end, became DarkClan's leader. Wrenkit in particular finds Acornstar's story interesting, filling in any gaps Nightpaw misses. Bramblekit, Mothkit, and Shadekit are less enthused.

That night, Nightpaw has a dream in which he is running through MoorClan's old territory. He finds himself in the Clan's old camp where he meets a grey tom – none other than Sootstar. The former MoorClan leader attempts to tell him of Heatherfur's rebellion from his own perspective, telling the truth-teller's apprentice that truth is never one-sided. Nightpaw is conflicted but, at the thought of having two mentors and possibly being better than Flamepaw, who is quickly becoming a model apprentice, Nightpaw agrees to meet Sootstar during the nights for extra training.

Over the next quarter moon, Nightpaw trains with Hailwatcher by day and with Sootstar by night. Slowly, he learns of Sootstar's perspective and how love and kindness are an asset, not a weakness as DarkClan claims. The two views cause great internal conflict for Nightpaw but, upon observing the Clan, he begins to notice these 'weak' qualities behind the masks the cats of DarkClan wear.

Soon after, Hailwatcher brings Nightpaw to the SeaClan cliffs and tells him the story of Quailmask, a warrior who attempted to save a

kit and drowned in the process, to teach him not to get in the way of fate; the weak will die no matter what others do to save them. When they return to camp, the meaning of the lesson becomes clear as Dawnstar calls Snailpaw and Minkpaw up for their warrior assessment. Over the course of three days, the two apprentices are to either catch prey or hunt for prisoners; they are allowed no food, only drink. Worried about the outcome, Nightpaw puts it out of his mind by training with Lionmask.

The cream guardian proves to be a good mentor and Nightpaw even manages to catch some prey, which Lionmask praises him for. Returning from training in the evening, they settle down to wait for Snailpaw and Minkpaw to return. Both pass their warrior assessments with Snailpaw (later Snailwhisker) returning with prey for the freshkill pile and Minkpaw (Minkfur) bringing back a dark tabby prisoner.

That night, Sootstar comes to Nightpaw in a dream and talks about the admirable qualities of a warrior. Before he leaves, he tells Nightpaw to look for his Clanmates' 'true selves'. Unconvinced, Nightpaw tries this method on the kits and finds that each is very different from the other: Bramblekit is logical, Shadekit is too caught up in the future to pay attention to the present, Mothkit is intelligent but quiet, and Wrenkit is curious and energetic.

Cinderpaw invites Nightpaw to share a meal with the other apprentices to save him from Wrenkit's pestering and he happily accepts. As they eat, Flamepaw and Dapplepaw tell of their catches that day, seeming to compete. When Nightpaw asks why this is, he is put down by his littermate. Cinderpaw apologizes for Flamepaw's recent withdrawn and rude behaviour and Nightpaw sees for the first time how kind she is. He realizes her softness poses a danger to her and tells her off in an effort to have her hide behind a mask once more.

Hailwatcher draws Nightpaw aside and takes him to the prisoner cave that same day, where Smoketalon warns them that the prisoner Minkfur brought in is rather feisty. Hailwatcher takes no notice and tells his apprentice the story of Foxtail and Minnowstrike, in which Minnowstrike runs for deputy and is pitted against her brother, Foxtail. Not wanting to kill him, she is then

forced to fight Blackstorm, who kills her, and Foxtail, who she desperately tried to save, is killed by Fogstar. Nightpaw fears that Hailwatcher can see right through his and Cinderpaw's relationship.

In mid leaffall, about a half moon later, Birchfrost has her kits. It is a hard kitting and, in the middle of the night, one of the kits dies. Cedarheart is punished before the Clan for having reached three infractions, at which point he must pick out an apprentice to succeed him in the healer's position. He chooses Mothkit, who becomes Mothpaw, and Bramblekit, Shadekit, and Wrenkit are apprenticed to Skunknose, Oakshade and Pigeonfang. Prior to their apprenticing, Nightpaw tells his first telling before the Clan and chooses the story of Acornstar, which he had been telling the kits multiple times in an effort to practice.

A couple of days later, Hailwatcher takes Nightpaw to Deathwaters, the former Moonwaters. It is the place where medicine cats went to contact StarClan and the truth-teller tells stories to try and convince Nightpaw of the inherent evil of medicine cats and their connections with StarClan. Nightpaw reflects on the differences between the truth-teller and StarClan, not quite convinced or sure as to whose side of the story to believe.

Cinderpaw invites him to share a meal with her again that evening and they share a catch made by Wrenpaw, apprenticed only three nights ago. Dapplepaw is rather unkind to the new apprentices, but Nightpaw is surprised to find Flamepaw much more agreeable. The ginger tom apologizes to his littermate for taunting him and admits that he believes his brother is a good truth-teller.

The next time Nightpaw dreams of MoorClan territory, Sootstar introduces him to Finchwatcher. Nightpaw notices that her figure is faded and the two StarClan cats explain that, without the faith of the living, StarClan will fade away into nothing. The truth-teller's apprentice takes it upon himself to raise awareness of StarClan within DarkClan to prevent them from fading, despite how dangerous the mission is.

As leafbare draws nearer, greencough season arrives and prey starts to become scarce. Birchfrost, Crowkit, Whitenose, Maplefeather, and Goosepelt are taken away from the camp to prevent their

sickness from spreading. Nightpaw finds himself spending more and more time with Webkit, Birchfrost's other kit and Crowkit's littermate. In the middle of a story, Hailwatcher draw Nightpaw aside to tell him the story of Snowpaw, an apprentice who saved a loner from starvation and was subsequently killed when he ratted her out, in an effort to make him understand his mistake of giving the caretakers freshkill; the caretakers are the lowest of the low in DarkClan. He leaps onto Nightpaw, suddenly violent, but lets him return to the nursery to finish Webkit's story.

Upon returning to the nursery, Nightpaw is attacked by Sedgecloud, who tells him that he will not be punished for another's mistakes. The caretaker is about to deal a blow to the apprentice when Hailwatcher comes bursting in. In the aftermath, Sedgecloud is taken to the prisoner cave, Dawnstar lets Nightpaw off the hook for giving the caretakers freshkill, and Nightpaw learns that Spiderthorn is his father. The other apprentices, having heard of the attack, attempt to comfort Nightpaw while he fights an internal battle about whether or not he can trust them with news of StarClan. Wrenpaw tries to get close to him but Nightpaw refutes her advances, refusing to be the reason why she gets hurt.

The next morning, Nightpaw visits Cedarheart to get his wounds checked. The healer is very ambiguous about where his loyalties lie and the apprentice wonders if he should tell him about StarClan, but puts the thought aside.

That afternoon, he finds himself in Dawnstar's den with Sleetfur, Cedarheart, and Hailwatcher. He learns that the meeting is to decide on pairings for the following season cycle; DarkClan does not have mates but rather seasonal pairings to keep cats from getting attached to each other. Swallowstorm and Sleetfur and matched, as are Thistleshade and Oakshade. Blackstrike's match is a debate between Minkfur and Sprucetail, with Sleetfur arguing that losing Sprucetail for even a couple of moons while she kits and nurses will have a large effect on the Clan's freshkill pile, as she is the Clan's best hunter. Cedarheart, on the other hand, warns that Minkfur is young and that kits at such a young age might pose a problem to her health.

As the debate unfolds, Hailwatcher tells the story of Ashfang, a tom

who protested a match made between his daughter and a tom twice her age. Cedarheart, realizing the truth-teller is trying to accuse him of treason, acquiesces and Minkfur is matched with Blackstrike. Dawnstar announces that she will also be paired this season and chooses Spiderthorn as her pairing; this angers Hailwatcher. During the council, Nightpaw also learns that, as the truth-teller, he is forbidden from having kits of his own. Playing with Webkit later, he subconsciously feels the anger and loss that comes with this knowledge.

About a quarter moon later, Nightpaw is assigned the task of helping with herb sorting. His lack of complaint is taken as a good sign by both Dawnstar and Hailwatcher. Mothpaw warns him to forgo helping others if he cannot even help himself, angrily storming off. As Nightpaw sorts herbs, Swallowstorm enter the medicine den and speaks with Cedarheart about her fear of being paired with Sleetfur again; since the healer's death sentence is already sealed, he lets his mask slip and reveals enough emotion to convince Nightpaw to tell the pair of StarClan. He steps forward when Cedarheart reveals he believes in an afterlife and, after telling them his secret, they agree to keep it quiet. Swallowstorm tells Nightpaw that she does not want to end up like his mother. Later on, when training with Spiderthorn, Nightpaw debates asking him about her but decides against. That night, the apprentice apologizes to Wrenpaw and she regains some of her old energetic spirit.

Leaffall ends and leafbare blows in. Nightpaw visits the sick of the Clan and speaks with Birchfrost and Goosepelt, both of whom are showing parts of their 'true selves' as Sootstar said. Goosepelt asks about the pairings, seeming particularly interested in Swallowstorm's well-being upon hearing that she has been paired with Sleetfur again.

When the first snow falls Maplefeather and Whitenose die of greencough, while Goosepelt, Birchfrost, and Crowkit escape the illness. Nightpaw asks about his mother, but Hailwatcher refuses to tell him and punishes him for his curiosity. The apprentice takes off across the moors and is attacked by a rogue she-cat. When he does not attack her back, she curiously says that he is not like the others, indicating she has met DarkClan cats before. She introduces herself

as Roxanne, the littermate of one of the prisoners. Nightpaw lets her get away, wondering if there are others out there who believe in StarClan but, realizing he is not focussing on his mission, he resolves to put all thoughts unrelated to it aside.

A quarter moon later, Cherrypaw and Dapplepaw's warrior assessment is interrupted by Sleetfur's killing by a fox. Cherrypaw fails her assessment and is made a caretaker (Cherrypool) and Dapplepaw is made a warrior (Dapplefrost). With the deputy dead, a deputy race is called and Marshclaw, Sprucetail, Oakshade, Flintmask, and Spiderthorn are nominated. Hailwatcher warns Nightpaw about the dangers of showing compassion to the lower ranks of the Clan and tells him that his mask is slipping.

That night, Nightpaw fights with Sootstar, resentment beginning to boil up between them. Finchwatcher reminds Nightpaw that not everything is black and white and that he must learn to accept the grey area. The apprentice realizes that he would not be satisfied with a life in DarkClan, as his curiosity would have led him astray regardless of his contact with Sootstar, and he agrees to continuing helping StarClan.

Awakening from the dream, Nightpaw watches the hail pour down. Cinderpaw and Mothpaw wake and he feels sudden guilt at having kept them in the dark for so long. As a result, he tells them of StarClan's existence. Through the hail, he sees the spotted figure of his mentor and reflects that he looks rather frail and emaciated as of late.

The apprentices continue their training but Nightpaw's battle skills are still lacking. Seeing him make a fool of himself, and Wrenpaw in the process, Skunknose calls a halt to training and sends the apprentices off hunting in pairs; Nightpaw is paired with Wrenpaw. In the forest, she tackles him to the ground and tells him off for not telling her what he told Cinderpaw and Mothpaw the previous night. They make up after he tells her it was for her protection because he cares about her. Slowly, he begins to realize that he has strong feelings for her.

When they return to camp, the first battle of the deputy race begins. In it, Marshclaw is accidentally killed by Sprucetail, who gets

caught up in the bloodlust. Having lost her mentor, Cinderpaw is reassigned to Smoketalon, who Nightpaw notes looks rather predatory.

As part of the deputy race selection, the candidates are interviewed and Hailwatcher and Nightpaw argue over whether Sprucetail or Oakshade should move forward; Flintmask, Spiderthorn, and Sprucetail end up as the three finalists. Frustrated with his mentor's growing distance, Nightpaw accidentally claws the left side of Flamepaw's face during battle training with his littermates. He uses his obsession over figuring out their birth parents as an excuse for the distraction; Cinderpaw seems interested while Flamepaw tells them to leave it alone.

The growing gap between mentor and apprentice causes Hailwatcher to pose Nightpaw a challenge: picking out prisoners for the deputy candidates to face in the final round of the race. The challenge is meant to test Nightpaw's observation of the candidates' weaknesses. He picks Sedgecloud for Sprucetail, remembering the shock on her face after she killed Marshclaw.

Wrenpaw, who is part of the patrol to the prisoner cave, does not hide her disgust at his evident compliance with DarkClan's rules and berates him for sending innocents to their death. Nightpaw explains that there is no other choice without exposing himself as a traitor to DarkClan. The she-cat reminds him of Acornstar's story and how hard the tom worked to become great; she advises Nightpaw that he could take some pointers from the tale. She motivates him to target the Clan more aggressively.

The final round of the deputy race proves anxiety-inducing: while Flintmask kills his opponent quickly, Spiderthorn and the prisoner he is pitted against prove to have a very similar fighting style and the prisoner begins to get the better of the DarkClan tom. Just as the prisoner is about to kill Spiderthorn, Dawnstar leaps in to save him. Unknown to the Clan, she is doing this as part of her own agenda – she is not yet pregnant with Spiderthorn's kits and losing him would mean she does not fulfill her duties as a role model to the Clan.

Sprucetail shows no remorse when killing Sedgecloud, as he refuses

to fight back. Hailwatcher tells the story of Poplarheart afterwards, highlighting how mercy has no place in DarkClan. Dawnstar announces that Spiderthorn has won the deputy race and the entire Clan erupts into chaos.

Nightpaw decides to get serious about Wrenpaw's advice and enlists Flamepaw to help him train. At first, Flamepaw is resistant, but he relents and agrees to train every second night at moonhigh. Over the next half moon, their extra training sessions increase Nightpaw's skills enough for him to defeat some of the other apprentices during battle training. Flamepaw's skill and growing size attracts the attention of both the guardians and Dawnstar.

Wrenpaw notices that the two toms are getting along better while Nightpaw and she hunt. He leads her to Deathwaters, confessing that training is the least of his worries, as StarClan has not contacted him recently.

Dawnstar and Thistleshade have their kits soon after. While naming their kits, Spiderthorn suggests Morningkit for the dilute tortoiseshell she-cat at Dawnstar's belly and the DarkClan leader attacks him. She settles on the name Lightkit, the other three kits christened Beetlekit, Stormkit, and Yewkit.

That night, there is an attack on the prisoner cave and Spiderthorn leads the charge, taking the Clan's best fighters with him. They return once they have secured the prisoners once more, none of whom managed to escape. Flintmask, however, is killed in the skirmish.

Sleep becomes hard to come by for Nightpaw as he wonders why StarClan has not been in touch with him. He notices a cluster of seven stars in the night sky and wonders if it is a sign. Training, too, becomes more gruelling and, as Bramblepaw boasts about his and Shadepaw's teamwork during the latest round, Nightpaw notices Cinderpaw is very detached. He notices once more the tension between her and Smoketalon but she tells him to stay out of it.

Later, Webkit and Crowkit beg Nightpaw to tell them a story; he obliges, but halts by the nursery when he hears two arguing voices. He identifies them as Dawnstar and Hailwatcher. In the argument,

Hailwatcher berates Dawnstar for her interference in Spiderthorn's battle round, saying she has lost the trust of the Clan. She, in turn, tells him that he wasted any trust and leadership he had on a she-cat. Hailwatcher warns Dawnstar that the darkest of nights will bring an end to DarkClan and Nightpaw hurries away to ensure they do not think he was eavesdropping.

The following sundown, Cinderpaw and Flamepaw are sent out for their warrior assessments. Nightpaw busies himself in order to stay away from Dawnstar and Hailwatcher, spending most of his time with either Wrenpaw or Webkit and Crowkit. In the meantime, he also finds a friend in Lionmask, who listens to the slightly rebellious stories he tells the kits without comment.

On the third sunset of the assessment, Flamepaw returns with a prisoner while Cinderpaw is dragged in by Smoketalon and Blackstrike around moonhigh. Though she has the prey to show for her loyalty to the assessment, Smoketalon argues that she let an invader, and potential prisoner, get away and did not engage them. Dawnstar puts the decision on Nightpaw's shoulders in an attempt to expose his treachery.

Instead, Nightpaw uses her own values of intelligence and cunning against her, telling the story of Pinefrost and how her decision to delay a battle may have saved the Clan at one point in time. Her lack of immediate action is similar to Cinderpaw's and, unable to argue, Dawnstar decides that Cinderpaw will be made a caretaker rather than executed. Cinderblossom retires to the nursery and Flamestrike is made a warrior. As the chapter closes, Hailwatcher tells Nightpaw that he must speak with him, making the apprentice's fur rise.

The truth-teller tells his apprentice the story of Greypaw and Deerpaw, two very different littermates, who became Greyflower, a caretaker, and Deerfrost, a warrior. Greyflower enlists her sister's help in escaping the Clan but, upon being caught, Deerfrost kills Greyflower. Hailwatcher's warning is that trust should not even be shared by littermates; Nightpaw, however, sees through the tale and realizes that Deerfrost's fear was strong enough to make her kill Greyflower in an effort to show her loyalty. Hailwatcher tells Nightpaw that he has nothing left to teach him and sends him

away.

Nightpaw decides to visit Cinderblossom in the nursery and stays with her until she falls asleep. As he is leaving, Spiderthorn and Flamestrike stop by to see the newborn kits and congratulate Nightpaw on his success, though Spiderthorn mentions that perhaps the story was not told 'properly'. Nightpaw makes it known that he knew exactly what he was doing and, if a life was spared because of it, it is because the truth-teller wished it so.

In his dreams that night, Nightpaw finds himself on the moors and he races to find Sootstar, relieved that StarClan has contacted him. Instead, he finds himself face to face with Heatherfur. She explains that when she died she found herself in a barren hell-like landscape before finally making her way to a dark forest - The Place of No Stars. Slowly, as more and more of DarkClan joined her, they were able to invade StarClan's grounds; Sootstar, Finchwatcher, and the rest of StarClan have become prisoners in their own territory.

Heatherfur gives Nightpaw a bargain: she will free StarClan if he turns himself in to Dawnstar. Seeing his hesitation, she adds that she will answer all of the questions that have been plaguing him for so long. Giving him until the end of newleaf to give his answer, Nightpaw wakes.

Lionmask is the only one up and Nightpaw suddenly feels as if he cannot trust the guardian now that he knows Heatherfur is watching him. Soon after, Hailwatcher collects him and they walk past the prisoner cave to the very edge of the territory. Here, Hailwatcher tells Nightpaw that it is time for him to leave. He names him Nightchaser and warns him one last time of the dangers of love.

Nightchaser, suddenly finding himself without any mentors at all - both Hailwatcher and Sootstar are now gone - remains still, suddenly feeling defeated. The clouds part, however, to reveal a single star and the newly named truth-teller returns to DarkClan, announcing that he will be making some changes. Dawnstar tries to stop him but Nightchaser's reasoning for teaching the Clan more about their past relies on intelligence, ambition, and strength and she finds herself powerless.

The next morning, she discusses Nightchaser's duties with him, which include watching the Clan for signs of traitors, telling stories at ceremonies, teaching the kits, and picking prisoners for executions. Nightchaser adds that he would also like to be added to hunting patrols to contribute to the Clan in other ways and access to training sessions with the apprentices to further his own skills. He also requests that he wants to teach the entire Clan and not just the kits. Dawnstar agrees to all terms, as long as Nightchaser tells her which lessons he is teaching beforehand.

Only moments later, a cry sounds from the nursery and Nightchaser, Lionmask, and Spiderthorn rush over to find a bloodied Lightkit. Spiderthorn attacks Snowdapple and Nightchaser, knowing he cannot save the caretaker, takes Lightkit to the healer's den – hesitantly, as she reminds him of Dawnstar.

Healing Lightkit, Cedarheart races off to tell Dawnstar her kit is alive; Nightchaser sees Mothpaw watching him fearfully, as if afraid of being left without her mentor. She tells him he must stay away from those he cares about if he wants to avoid drawing Dawnstar's attention to them. He tells her of Heatherfur's deal and she very determinedly tells him not to turn himself in, believing that they will be able to restore StarClan and defeat DarkClan.

Spiderthorn comes to collect him from the healer's den and asks him to join a hunting patrol; Nightchaser ends up hunting on the moors with Swallowstorm and Goosepelt. At the site of MoorClan's old camp, Swallowstorm admits that she wishes she knew more about her family. Goosepelt assures her he will not turn her in for voicing these thoughts as he is her father. He also suggests that Nightchaser visit Deathwaters to see if he can get in contact with StarClan.

The new truth-teller bides his time, spending the first moon of his new-found freedom telling the Clan stories of the Old Life and slowly learning who is interested in the ideals opposing DarkClan. Cedarheart and Mothpaw he is sure of, and three of the guardians – Goosepelt, Birchfrost, and Lionmask – also seem likely to be swayed. Swallowstorm and Sprucetail, who he spends many of his hunting patrols with also prove to be highly interested. The caretakers, kits, and Thistleshade, as well as the father of her kits

Oakshade, listen to his stories attentively. During training sessions, Nightchaser finds Jaystrike, Snailwhisker, Bramblepaw, and Wrenpaw eager to hear about the past.

When the rainy season hits and the Clan retires to their dens early to avoid the humid air, Nightchaser sneaks out of camp and heads for Deathwaters. Instead of a message from StarClan, though, he sees a snippet of DarkClan's past in which Sandfeather, a caretaker, is executed for having kits. Hailwatcher, who seems somewhat attached to the kits, saves a pale tortoiseshell kit and names her Morningkit, explaining that she will be a good experiment – to see if traitor's blood runs through her.

When Nightchaser wakes he finds himself in the healer's den, where Flamestrike explains that he saw him sneak out and followed him, dragging him back to camp through the rain. The truth-teller is confronted by Dawnstar and Spiderthorn about his business at Deathwaters the previous night but, unable to pull any information out of him, leave him to rest.

The chills and cold caused by the rain cause Nightchaser to hallucinate as he dreams and he sees portions of his past – Flamekit atop the High Rocks naming him the truth-teller, his first lesson with Hailwatcher, Dawnstar's cold eyes, and Cinderpaw and Mothpaw when he first told them of StarClan. He then sees Wrenpaw and, unable to stop his dream self from attacking her, waits for her blood to stain his claws.

The scene changes and he finds himself on the moors where he sees Roxanne pacing and a mass of fighting cats behind her. As he races to help, he sees his mentor's receding figure which slowly turns into that of a golden she-cat, who throws herself at him telling him he has two moons left. His vision goes black and he sees he is now in a forest, a pale tortoiseshell kit saying his name; he realizes it is Morningkit. Voices from within the forest taunt him and he realizes he is completely lost, both literally and figuratively.

He wakes with a strangled cry, finding Wrenpaw at the entrance of his den. She comforts him, suggesting that they can use DarkClan's own history against them in their attack. Nightchaser is reminded of Hailwatcher's words – "the darkest of nights" – and feels slightly

uplifted.

Webkit and Crowkit are apprentice to Thistleshade and Jaystrike, respectively. Nightchaser realizes he is still uneasy about Cherrypool and Lionmask and refrains from telling them anything about StarClan. When Sprucetail asks him to hunt with her, he readily agrees. The warrior tells him that she has received news from Roxanne, who is rallying the alley cats to attack on the night of the new moon, just over a moon from the present. This night also coincides with Heatherfur's deadline.

Nightchaser takes to sitting atop his log den, watching the dark night sky – the stars have disappeared. A moon from the day of the attack, he is joined by Mothpaw, who tells him that Cinderblossom has come to her seeking help in light of her pregnancy. Nightchaser suspects Smoketalon is the father. He also promises Mothpaw that he will keep Cedarheart alive until the rebels can escape.

Before Nightchaser can comfort Cinderblossom the next morning, he is asked to join a hunting patrol with Lionmask, Pebblefur, Jaystrike, and Crowpaw. In the forest, Crowpaw asks to be shown the hunting crouch one more time and Nightchaser is put to the test. As he is about to leap, he realizes there is a fox in the undergrowth. He manages to dodge it, but the fox wounds Crowpaw. In the short bloody battle following, the fox also wounds Jaystrike and kills Pebblefur. Lionmask sacrifices himself for Nightchaser, throwing himself and the fox over the edge of RockClan's old camp.

Nightchaser's injured shoulder continued to pain him and Crowpaw is knocked into an unconscious state. When the truth-teller is able to stand the pain, he learns that Flamestrike and Sprucetail have replaced the two deceased guardians. He speaks with Cedarheart, who warns him to stay quiet about the rebellion. Mothpaw is off treating Smoketalon, who during Nightchaser's absence has been clawed by Wrenpaw during practice (there is a possibility she found out about Cinderblossom's pregnancy and had the same suspicions as Nightchaser).

Once Nightchaser is able to walk about the camp, he tells the kits the story of Nettleflight, a kind and compassionate warrior who

catches the eye of Pheasantstar. He takes her on as an advisor, as she is popular with the Clan, and hopes to make her his mate, suggesting that the Clan be paired for life rather than every season cycle. When he finds Nettleflight sneaking out with Raventail, he kills the tom in a rage and mates with Nettleflight. When she gives birth to kits two moons later, he finds one of them looks very much like Raventail. He tries to kill the kit but Nettleflight stops him and gives him the choice to renounce his leadership and leave DarkClan or be killed. He agrees and Nettleflight lives out her days as a well-respected warrior.

The story is meant to calm Cinderblossom. He further consoles her by telling her that the rebels will attack on the night of the new moon. Running into Wrenpaw that evening, Nightchaser sneaks out of camp with her and they head for the moors where they spend the night together.

To Nightchaser's surprise, no one notices their stolen night. Emboldened by their lack of watchfulness, he soon has all of the rebels in on the plan. With half a moon left, he continues to watch the night sky and realizes there are still no stars in it.

This time, Flamestrike joins him, trying to glean information from Nightchaser. Sadly, the truth-teller realizes he does not trust his own littermate. Unable to learn anything, Flamestrike tells Nightchaser that he must choose a prisoner to be executed before the Clan as Dawnstar hopes to boost morale.

The next morning, Nightchaser visits the prisoner cave with Birchfrost and Sprucetail. With Jaystrike, another rebel, guarding the cave, Nightchaser tells the prisoners, one of which is Roxanne's littermate, Bronco, about the attack. They are unwilling to trust until Sprucetail convinces them that none of the rebels would willingly stay with DarkClan. The patrol then hunts and brings the prisoners prey to strengthen them should they wish to help with the attack.

Nightchaser goes to Dawnstar, hoping that he can get her to change her mind about killing a prisoner – now that he has told them about the attack, they might spill the secret in an effort to save their own lives. He suggests asking for volunteers from the Clan, knowing

none of the rebels will step forward and Dawnstar will be forced to kill one of her loyal warriors.

Dawnstar, however, does not know this and argues that only the weak would step forward in an effort to escape the darkness. She then tells Nightchaser of his mother, Morningfire, who was a rather enthusiastic and popular warrior up until she became pregnant with him and his littermates. She tells him the Morningfire attempted to starve herself to death, nearly dying during her kitting, and had her kits taken away from her as she could not feed them. A moon after Nightchaser's birth, the she-cat swallowed some deathberries to end her suffering. Dawnstar says she knew Morningfire to be a traitor all along, as her mother was Sandfeather, and she and Sandkit grew up together. No one escapes the darkness, not even in death.

With no other choice but to provide a prisoner, Nightchaser spends the night out by the prisoner cave, thinking over his decision. He asks Goosepelt if there is a possibility of finding a cat on the territory before sundown and the guardian immediately goes off in search of rogues to use in the execution. Upon his return to camp, Birchfrost, Sprucetail, and Jaystrike offer to search as well under the guise of hunting for the Clan.

Spiderthorn jokes that Nightchaser is taking his deputy position and the truth-teller wonders if his father would willingly tell him anything more about Morningfire. During their exchange, an out-of-breath Mothpaw tells them that Dawnstar wants them in the healer's den, where Crowpaw has woken up from his comatose state. Dawnstar drops hints that Cedarheart's time is at an end and Nightchaser, seeing Crowpaw's distress, assures him that they will only be there for another moon.

That dusk, Dawnstar executes the prisoner Birchfrost and Sprucetail manage to catch, stressing the fact that there is treachery within the Clan. Nightchaser tells the rebels to lie low while himself feeling extremely paranoid. Cinderblossom assures him everything will be alright, as there are only five sunsets left before the new moon.

Nightchaser spends his last days in DarkClan telling the kits as many stories as possible. Beetlekit and Lightkit, two of Dawnstar's kits, fight and Nightchaser suggests they combine story and play.

The kits re-enact the story of Heatherfur's rebellion before the Clan and Nightchaser is reminded of his own days as a kit when he, Flamestrike, and Cinderblossom did the same.

Following the re-enactment Dawnstar announces the beginning of Bramblepaw, Shadepaw, and Wrenpaw's warrior assessments. With dread, Nightchaser realizes that the apprentices will be returning from the assessment a night too late, as the new moon is in two nights' time.

That night, Nightchaser wakes to scuffling outside of his den and is quickly knocked unconscious by Smoketalon and Flamestrike. He finds himself in the prisoner cave, along with Birchfrost, Swallowstorm, Cedarheart, Mothpaw, Snailwhisker, and Cinderblossom. They speculate as to who betrayed them, hoping it was no one within the rebel group.

At moonhigh, Flamestrike and Smoketalon come to the prisoner cave with a deal: if Nightchaser turns himself in, the rest of the rebels will be spared. This deal is reminiscent of Heatherfur's and Nightchaser has until the following moonhigh – the night of the new moon – to turn himself in.

As he watches the night sky, he notices the cluster of seven star, symbolizing the seven rebels trapped in the prisoner cave. His vision goes black and Sootstar appears to him, explaining hurriedly that StarClan is still alive and that the rebels will be freed by Sprucetail the following night as the alley cats attack. He warns, however, that they are not to attack the camp or they will lose valuable lives.

Waking, he tells the others of his dream, leaving out the part about the attack. Four prisoners offer to join their fighting force and they all wait for their rescuers to arrive. Rain starts to pour throughout the night but Nightchaser continues sitting below the grate of the prisoner cave and stares up at the sky, fantasizing about a life outside of DarkClan's rules where he can be with Wrenpaw.

Jaystrike takes up the night watch and, soon after, Sprucetail, Crowpaw, and Wrenflight arrive (the apprentices sent out for their assessments were asked to return a night early to witness the

prisoners' execution). They free the prisoners and take off towards the camp to help in the fight, disregarding Sootstar's warning. It is decided that they will only kill if absolutely necessary. Before jumping into the fray, Nightchaser and Wrenflight have a moment together in which they voice their love for each other.

The first enemy Nightchaser faces is Minkfur, who matches him blow for blow. Bramblepaw (now Bramblefire) intervenes and Minkfur races away. Nightchaser comes to Cinderblossom's aid, as she is pinned by Smoketalon, but does not kill the tom at his littermate's request. The truth-teller is then attacked by Flamestrike who, instead of clawing him, asks if Nightchaser is really going through with the rebellion. Nightchaser, now knowing he was right not to trust his littermate all along, argues that the rebels can still win. Flamestrike, alluding to the many stories Nightchaser himself has told, tells him that love will only make him weak. Taunting him further, Flamestrike turns to Dawnstar, who holds the limp body of Wrenflight in her jaws.

Thrown into a rage, Nightchaser leaps at the DarkClan leader but is stopped once more by Flamestrike. They fight like they have for moons during their nightly training sessions but, since they know each others weaknesses, neither is able to defeat the other. Finally, Nightchaser gets past Flamestrike's defences. The ginger tom denounces him as his brother and, angered, Nightchaser aims to kill.

He is thrown aside by Spiderthorn, who questions Nightchaser's claim that it is love that makes him strong – seeing Wrenflight's dead body seems like revenge is what gives him strength. Nightchaser turns the tables on his father, asking what Morningfire's dead body did for him. Angered, Spiderthorn tells Nightchaser the truth about Morningfire: she killed herself because she could not bear to watch her kits grow up in DarkClan and abandoned them instead. Nightchaser rebuttals with the claim that Spiderthorn loved Morningfire and is himself a traitor to DarkClan. Though Spiderthorn does not denounce the claim, he tells his son that he has accepted that there is no escaping the darkness. He also makes Nightchaser realize that, with the stars out, the night is not the darkest of nights at all, echoing Sootstar's warning.

After offering him protection should Nightchaser surrender and the truth-teller's subsequent unacceptance, Spiderthorn battles his own son, inflicting wound upon wound. He is saved by Sprucetail and Mothpaw leads him away from the battle. Sprucetail calls a retreat and the rebels run for their lives, accompanied by Bronco and Roxanne as the rest of the alley cats run ahead.

DarkClan moves to follow them and Cedarheart and Swallowstorm turn around to fight as the others get away. Cedarheart gives Mothpelt her full name before his death. The rebels run for the Twolegplace, diminished in number – Goosepelt, Snailwhisker, and Wrenflight were killed in the camp. Nightchaser continues on, believing he should be dead as well as he disregarded Sootstar's warning.

The epilogue, told from Cinderblossom's point of view, takes place two moons after the night of the attack. Her kits, born a moon before, were mostly stillborn or dead within the night, but her only surviving kit, Dewkit, is a pawful despite his crippled back leg and crumpled ears. Mothpelt comes to visit the makeshift nursery in the alley cat camp and offers to stay with Dewkit while Cinderblossom goes to Nightchaser.

Crossing the maze of fences, Cinderblossom finds Nightchaser sitting at the very edge of the Twolegplace. He tells her that he blames himself for the deaths of the rebels and Cinderblossom attempts to soothe his grief. StarClan grows stronger and she assures that they will be able to attack once more.

Seeing Nightchaser's depressed state slightly lifted, Cinderblossom asks if he will accompany her back to camp even though she knows he will continue watching the sky like he always does. She returns to the alley cat camp with the bittersweet thought that, for now, all they can do is wait...

// prologue //

The smell of rain hung heavy, as thick as smoke. Clouds gathered far above, black and foreboding against the little spots of light coming from the dens below. The darkness made it hard to tell what time it was, but she continued to watch the sky all the same.

When the heavens opened up she finally rose to her paws, white fur soon speckled with brown as she made her way through the Twolegplace. The droplets poured down around her, hitting anything they could reach. The cement beneath her became a mottled grey and the white fences turned slippery under the rain's assault.

For a moment, she worried the rain would hold up her companion but she quickly brushed the thought aside. He had promised her a meeting tonight and he wouldn't have forgotten; he was loyal to a fault. And, aside from that, strong and incredibly handsome.

She sighed as she padded through the rain, images filling her head. Perhaps, soon, they would truly be together and not forced to meet in secrecy. A kick in her stomach reminded her of everything she hoped to speak of tonight; everything she hoped would convince him that, this time, he should stay.

Arriving beneath the sprawling willow that was their meeting place, she settled in a nook in its roots, amber eyes focused on the rain as it dripped from the willow's feathery branches. One, two, three drops fell to the water already pooling around the tree and, with some sadness, she realized their meeting would not be a very long one tonight.

"And who might you be waiting for, pretty queen?"

The voice startled her to her paws and she turned to see his broad-shouldered figure before her. His fur looked almost brown after being wetted by the rain but she knew that it was normally a cream, almost golden shade.

A deep breath. "The father of my kits," she replied, settling back into her nook and wrapping her fluffy tail around her paws.

His amber eyes flashed at the news, some of the joy in them receding. "Kits?"

She nodded, unsure whether giving him the news so quickly had been a good idea. For a moon now she had been wanting to tell him, wanting to make their relationship something more than just a few meetings every couple of moons.

"How many?" The excitement had returned to the tom's face and he pressed himself closer.

"I don't know, it's still too early to tell," she said. "But I hope they're all as strong and handsome as you are."

He purred. "I hope they're all as beautiful and smart as you."

Then, he suddenly pulled back, worry clouding his amber gaze. "You won't be in trouble for having kits without a mate around, will you?"

The she-cat blinked in confusion. "Why would that get me in trouble? She-cats around these parts never have to say who the father is if it doesn't suit them."

The tension disappeared from his shoulders but her own confusion remained. "Why do you ask?"

Once more, she saw him tense and the battle behind his eyes told her he was hiding something. Her own fur bristled as she realized suddenly that she might not truly know this tom at all. She didn't even know his real name.

It wasn't that he didn't want her to. Hiding their identities from each other was just safer. If his Clan ever found out he had been here, or if they knew her name, she could only imagine the indescribable horrors they might resort to.

"I ask because she-cats are not allowed to have kits outside of a pairing where I come from," he replied, cutting into her thoughts.

"Every season, three or four pairs of cats are named to mate and it is their duty to bring kits to the Clan."

She gasped in horror. "They're *forced* to mate?"

He nodded. "And if a she-cat is found pregnant outside of these pairings she is killed."

The she-cat wrapped her tail tightly around her belly. "The kits too?"

The tom looked away. "Sometimes the queens are lucky enough to be killed before they give birth to their kits."

Her eyes widened at his insinuation and, suddenly, she felt anger bubble up deep within her. Who were these cats to take kits away from mothers? Who were they to kill members of their Clan, their *family*, for wanting to love?

"Leave them," she snarled. "What kind of life is that, Red? Forced to mask your emotions or else be killed? Unable to make your own choices, your entire life dictated by the will of your leader? Don't you want to be your own cat? Have a mate, have a family, have a life?"

She could hear how pleading her words were, the whine in her voice growing as she willed him to believe them. How could he possibly stay in a place like that when he could be with her, with their kits?

"Daisy," he began, and she flinched at the use of the name. If she could, she would tell him her real one. "I wish for all of those things – "

"Then stay!" she pleaded, feeling a telltale constriction in her chest. She knew there was a 'but' coming.

"It's not that simple," the tom continued. "The Clan needs me."

She opened her mouth to retaliate but he silenced her by brushing his cream tail over her jaw.

"Listen," he said quietly. "There are some in the Clan who are beginning to stir, who are unhappy with the way things are. Our new truth-teller, Nightchaser, is planning a rebellion and if there's any cat who can convince others to join him, it's him. Besides that, there's a prophecy that talks of the darkest night defeating DarkClan and I can almost guarantee he's the one it refers to. So don't you see?"

Her blank face told him she did not.

"In a moon's time, maybe two, we'll be free of DarkClan. I will help the rebels to the best of my ability but know that as soon as it is over you will be my first stop. You will be able to join the Clan then, if you wish, but if you wish to stay here then I would be more than happy to say goodbye to the Clan to be with you."

By the end of his speech, she could no longer keep the waves of joy at bay. Letting them wash over her, she pushed her nose into his broad chest, breathing in the scents of rain and earth. A purr rumbled deep in his chest as he swiped his tongue over her pale ears affectionately.

The moment lasted only so long as a new thought entered her head.

"What if you don't make it through the rebellion?" she asked quietly, keeping her head against his chest. She did not want to face the reality of losing him, not now that she was so close to having him.

Another purr pulsed through him. "What, me? Haven't you seen me fight?"

She let go of her worries as she remembered the first time they met. She was being chased by the Junkyard Gang, all the way from the sewer bridge to this exact willow here when he jumped in and saved her. His claws flew without hesitation and his fangs flashed in the sunlight; she remembered cowering when he turned to her.

But he did not hurt her. Instead, he kept coming back.

"Don't you worry your pretty little head," he murmured. "I'll be back

before you know it. I promise."

She held on to that promise. She had to believe he would come back once more.

The kits were born on a sunny early greenleaf day, the spitting image of their father. No one questioned their origins and she did not bother telling anyone – one day, everyone would see. The kits would know their father and she would have a mate by her side.

But even after news of the rebellion reached her, even after the Twolegplace suddenly welcomed eight very injured cats, she remained alone.

He never came back, leaving her with not even so much as a name.

// Here it is, the prologue! If you're confused as to what's going on make sure you've read Unmasked (available on my profile) or the recap at the beginning of this book. If you've already done that and are still confused, good! Prologues are never meant to give everything away (in my mind, at least).

As before, updates will be every Sunday. And now I'm off to a internet-less place to relax this long weekend! Happy Canada Day to all of my Canadian friends, and Happy Independence Day to all of my American ones :)

// allegiances //

// darkclan //

leader // Dawnstar // blue and cream tortoiseshell she-cat with cold amber eyes

deputy // Spiderthorn // black tom with amber eyes; *apprentice: Rainpaw*

healer // Reedpaw // dark brown tabby tom with copper eyes

guardians // Newtfang // ginger tabby tom with hazel eyes; *apprentice: Stormpaw*
Rowanstorm // brown tabby tom with green eyes
Smoketalon // dark grey tom with hazel eyes
Flamestrike // ginger tabby tom with amber eyes; *apprentice: Lightpaw*
Shadowpelt // black she-cat with green eyes
Pigeonfang // grey and white she-cat with amber eyes

warriors // Skunknose // black and white tom with hazel eyes
Oakshade // brown tabby tom with amber eyes
Duskwhisker // black tom with hazel eyes; *apprentice: Yewpaw*
Thistleshade // dark grey she-cat with copper eyes
Dapplefrost // tortoiseshell she-cat with hazel eyes; *apprentice: Beetlepaw*
Shademask // black tom with green eyes

apprentices // Lightpaw // dilute tortoiseshell she-cat with hazel eyes
Beetlepaw // black she-cat with amber eyes
Yewpaw // cream tabby tom with amber eyes
Stormpaw // grey tabby tom with amber eyes
Rainpaw // grey tabby she-cat with amber eyes

queens // Minkfur // brown tabby she-cat with copper eyes

kits // Antkit // black tom with yellow eyes

// alley cat allegiances //

leader // Bronco // large dark brown tom with amber eyes

second-in-command // Condor // giant brown tabby tom with amber eyes

advisor // Roxanne // brown tabby she-cat with white belly, paws and tail tip; amber eyes

medic // Lily // dilute tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes; mostly white, with the exception of a coloured patch on her left flank, lower back and right ear

secondary medic // Mothpelt // grey tabby she-cat with green eyes; formerly of DarkClan

providers // Mira // white she-cat with a fluffy tail; one blue and one copper eye
Indigo // black she-cat with dark blue eyes; former kittypet
Leo // young ginger tom with green eyes
Bramblefire // brown tabby tom with green eyes; formerly of DarkClan

mentors // Quartz // silver tabby she-cat with white legs, chest, belly, face and ears; blue eyes
Beaver // brown tom with a thick tail and amber eyes
Fiero // bright ginger tom with dark amber eyes
Jaystrike // dark grey tom with amber eyes; formerly of DarkClan

trainees // Hazel // light brown she-cat with green eyes
Finch // small brown tom with golden eyes
Olive // light brown bengal she-cat with green eyes
Soren // silver-grey bengal tom with blue eyes
Oats // small cream tabby tom with green eyes
Crisp // quirky cream tabby she-cat with big amber eyes
Robin // brown tabby and white she-cat with copper eyes

Webpaw // grey tabby she-cat with hazel eyes; formerly of DarkClan
Crowpaw // black tom with golden eyes; formerly of DarkClan

queens // Cinderblossom // grey she-cat with hazel eyes; formerly of DarkClan

kits // Dewkit // grey tom with hazel eyes

undetermined status // Nightchaser // black tom with white-rimmed, golden eyes
Birchfrost // grey and white she-cat with one blue and one gold eye
Sprucetail // black she-cat with green eyes

// gang allegiances //

commander // Jet // black tom with hazel eyes

lieutenant // Fang // black tom with white paws, chest and tail tip; green eyes

fighters // Ace // blue-grey tabby tom with dark amber eyes
Chrome // dark grey tabby tom with amber eyes; very defined black stripes
Gannet // muscled black and white tom with copper eyes

hunters // Shard // black and grey mottled tom with dark amber eyes
Cobalt // very dark blue-grey tom with copper eyes
Queenie // pretty silver she-cat with hazel eyes

scouts // Penny // small, russet-coloured she-cat with copper eyes

omegas // Flea // small black she-cat with copper eyes
Pixie // lilac tabby she-cat with green eyes

// outside of the groups //

loners // Killian // fierce dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

kittypets // Bree // small tortoiseshell and white she-cat with

hazel eyes
Minerva // grey she-cat with wise amber eyes
Charlie // fat brown tabby tom with green eyes
Pearl // fluffy white she-cat with light blue eyes
Periwinkle // fluffy grey and white she-cat with startling blue eyes

// chapter 1 //

The darkness covered his movements and soft conversation the sound of his pawsteps. He crept forward, eyes on his prey. It seemed unaware of his advances but he could never be too careful.

He slid into a crouch, slightly lopsided, tail not quite still as excitement filled him. He bunched his muscles and –

"Gotcha'!" he squeaked a moment too soon and the grey tail whisked away before he had a chance to land on it.

"Nice try, Dewkit," Cinderblossom purred. "But you announced your victory a moment too soon." Beside her, Mothpelt gave a purr of amusement.

The grey kit shook out his fur, looking between the two she-cats before him.

"Did you hear me coming Mothpelt?" His eyes grew wide as she stifled a purr.

"Only in the last possible moment," she replied. "But I'm no warrior, just a simple medic."

Dewkit scrunched his nose up as he remembered the scents of some of Mothpelt's herbs. "I wouldn't want to be a medic. Sorting herbs all day would be boring."

Before Cinderblossom could chastise him for his rudeness, he bounced up, nearly losing his footing in his excitement. "I want to be a warrior, the strongest of them all!"

A soft expression filled Cinderblossom's face. "Perhaps one day you will be." Her tone carried a sadness Dewkit could not quite place but he brushed it off. Of course he would be a great warrior. He would be as quick as Jaystrike and as strong as Bronco and as smart as Sprucetail and as determined as Beaver. The other alley cats

wouldn't know what hit them.

"When do I start training?" he asked, quivering with enthusiasm. "Crowpaw's been telling me all about their training and Crisp and Oats were showing me the battle moves they learned their first day." He thrust a paw out at his mother's tail, losing his balance in the process.

Mothpelt steadied him with a forepaw. "All in good time," she purred amiably.

Dewkit huffed. "If I can't train can I at least go play?" he asked.

Cinderblossom turned to the entrance of the cardboard den. "Leafbare is starting to blow in. There will be snow soon." She sounded worried.

Mothpelt rolled her eyes. "All the more reason to have him play now rather than later." She turned to the bouncing kit. "Off you go. I'll take care of your mother."

The grey kit sped out of the den before they could say another word.

He bounded from one corner of the alley cat camp to the other, past the other cardboard dens stacked one atop another. Behind the dens a red brick wall rose even higher, tall enough to block out the light of the sun come midday. The other two walls that enclosed the camp were hard and flat, the same colour as Dewkit's fur. The fourth side, open to the world, led to a calm Thunderpath, with trees lining its sides.

Dewkit made his way to this opening, took a left, and padded down a stretch of grey path. Up ahead, he could see the big expanse of field where the alley cats trained, the grass underpaw brown and brittle now that leafbare was near. There was a small lake there, lined with reeds and bullrushes, and a strange structure crossed its narrowest point. Twolegs walked there sometimes but they appeared rarely now that it had grown cold.

The kit bounded through the grass, preferring its texture to the

hardness of the path, and headed for a small group of bushes and trees. Twoleg dens stood tall all around the expanse of green but here, in this little grove, it felt almost like a forest.

He stopped, scenting the air. Dewkit could tell the trainees and their mentors had been here not too long ago; their smells were still fresh. Yet, it seemed too quiet for the group to be training here. Usually, Quartz's strict commands could be heard from where he stood.

Then, Dewkit was barrelled over by a familiar cream bundle. Yowling, he latched onto the figure and the two rolled, finally coming to a halt a couple of foxlengths away.

"I got him!" his attacker cried proudly, fluffing up her cream and white tail.

"No fair, he was supposed to be my prey!" A nearly identical cream and white tom padded up, looking very indignant.

"Should have leaped faster then, Oats," the she-cat replied, shrugging.

"I didn't hear you coming, Crisp," Dewkit offered, getting to his paws. He could now see the other trainees bounding towards them: the light brown forms of Hazel and Finch, the spotted silver and brown of Soren and Olive, Robin's tabby stripes, Webpaw's grey figure, and Crowpaw black as night.

"Very good, Crisp," Hazel praised as she approached. She was one of the older trainees, nearly old enough to become a mentor or provider for the alley cat group.

"You'll be a provider in no time." That was Quartz, voice always loud and strong and commanding attention.

The trainees assembled themselves in a line and, at a flick of Crowpaw's tail, Dewkit sidled in between him and Oats. Quartz's blue eyes ran up and down the line before finally landing on Soren. She flicked her tail and the silver spotted tom stepped forward. With a flick of her ear she called forward Webpaw, who bounced up

to the older trainee.

"On your marks." Soren uncurled his tail from around his paws, gracefully sliding into a perfect hunter's crouch. Across from him, Webpaw did the same, though much more energetically.

Quartz's nod was nearly imperceptible, but it was enough. Before Dewkit could blink, Soren had launched himself into the air. Webpaw slid beneath him, flipping onto her back as he sailed by and extending a paw to rake his underbelly. Her legs too short, the she-cat missed by a hair-length. She growled as she flipped back over, wheeling around to face the alley cat.

This time, Soren charged forward, taking the lower route. Webpaw dodged by leaping over him, paws barely touching the ground before turning to catch the spotted tom's tail.

He was too quick, catching her outstretched paw with his own, teeth bared. Knocking the she-cat's blow aside, he retaliated with a blow, bringing a heavy paw down on Webpaw's head. She shook her head, dazed, but did not let her guard down. A strike to Soren's cheek had the tom reeling back, regaining his composure.

Dewkit's wide hazel eyes shifted back and forth between the silver tom and the grey she-cat, mouth hanging open in awe at their speed, their flexibility, their skill. Crowpaw nudged him gently and the kit closed his mouth, though his eyes continued to flick from one trainee to the other.

Finally, Soren had Webpaw pinned beneath him and Quartz called an end to the session.

"Can anyone tell me why Soren was able to pin Webpaw down?" The silver she-cat stepped towards the line of trainees as Soren and Webpaw rejoined the lineup.

Dewkit yearned to answer her question but Olive beat him to it.

"Webpaw opened up a weak spot – in this case her side," the light brown she-cat responded. "With enough speed, Soren was able to give her a blow to the ribs, which would cause her to recoil, and

then push her over and pin her."

"Very good, Olive." Quartz beamed at the trainee; Webpaw looked like she might murder her.

"Who's up next?" The trainees perked up immediately.

"Me!" Dewkit said, bouncing up before he could stop himself. Quartz paused.

"Dewkit, you are not yet a trainee," she said pointedly, but not unkindly. "Your time will come. For now," she ushered him back into line, "it would be best if you continued to watch."

"Observation can be a formidable skill." The voice startled Dewkit and he turned to meet the white-rimmed eyes of a pitch black tom. He felt his insides squirm as golden eyes pierced right through him, making him feel incredibly small.

"Nightchaser, how nice of you to join our training session," Quartz said, though there was an evident edge to her voice. "We were just about to start another round. Perhaps Crowpaw and Hazel this time?"

Neither trainee seemed enthused to be training in front of Nightchaser. Dewkit knew Crowpaw expected to lose – fighting was not the tom's greatest skill by far – and to have Nightchaser watching must have only made the feeling worse.

Sure enough, Hazel had Crowpaw pinned in a matter of heartbeats.

"Can anyone tell me what went wrong this time?" Quartz asked.

This time, Dewkit beat everyone else to it. "He was not quick enough!" Had the trainee moved a moment sooner, Hazel wouldn't have hit him with the front paw strike, which led to her bowling him over with her weight and pinning him.

Before Quartz could respond, Nightchaser stepped in. "Wrong. He let his guard down, expecting Hazel to attack from the sides instead of head on like she had the previous couple of strikes."

Dewkit refused to look at the tom, though he could feel his eyes on him.

"Precisely," Quartz replied. "Though Dewkit was also partially correct. Had he been quick enough, he might have dodged the frontal attack."

This time, Dewkit did turn to look at Nightchaser. The tom only bowed his head to the silver she-cat, flicking his tail in farewell. Then, he was padding off in the direction of the alley cat camp.

"I think that's enough for one day," Quartz decided. The remaining trainees breathed a sigh of relief.

Only Olive seemed disappointed. "Can we go hunting instead?" she asked eagerly.

Soren groaned at his littermate's enthusiasm. "Give it a rest, will you? You can't protect and hunt for the Clan single-pawed. And, besides, the providers will have caught more than enough prey by now." He flicked his tail at the sun, now past its highest point.

"I'll go with you," Webpaw offered, stepping forward. Olive seemed startled but nodded her thanks.

"Don't stray too far," Quartz ordered. "I'll send one of the providers to you when we get back to camp. Finch, go with them."

The small brown tom huffed but did as told.

"Race you back to camp!" Crisp cried once the makeshift hunting patrol had departed. She poked Oats in the side, who hissed in annoyance, but leaped to his paws all the same. He took off after his littermate, Robin following close behind. Hazel and Soren exchanged a look and pelted after them as well.

Crowpaw got to his paws slowly, stretching as he did so. Dewkit stayed at his side, watching the racing trainees sadly. He glanced down at his twisted back leg, averting his gaze quickly.

"Come on, let's get back to camp," Crowpaw mewed, letting Quartz take the lead.

"But camp is so boring," Dewkit whined, knowing Cinderblossom wouldn't let him out of her sight once he was back inside the confining walls.

"Well, where else would you want to go?" the black tom asked, glancing sideways at the kit.

"Anywhere! We could go explore some of the gardens along that busy Thunderpath that Leo was talking about the other day. Or we could go to that park where Bramblefire spotted a raccoon. Or maybe we could go to the edge of the Twolegplace and watch the sunset!"

Dewkit's excitement got the better of him and he nearly planted his face in the ground as he stumbled over his own paws.

Crowpaw sighed, helping the kit back up. "Those are all quite far away and we would need to take a lot of fence-ways to get there. I'm not sure you're big enough to get on top of some of those fences."

As nicely as Crowpaw said it, Dewkit knew what he truly meant. He glanced at his back leg once more, silently cursing it as he limped along. He decided to change the subject.

"Is Nightchaser always like that?"

"Like what?"

"Grumpy. Distant. Kind of mean."

Crowpaw grunted. "He's been like that ever since we got here, yes."

"Why does he seem to hate me so much?"

This time, the trainee took a little bit longer to respond. "It's a long and complicated story, and I'm not sure I should be the one to tell you it. Let's just say Nightchaser has trouble fighting some of his demons."

The roundabout answer was not satisfactory in any way to Dewkit but he could see Crowpaw's resolve not to say anything more. The

grey kit dragged his feet on the ground, hoping the older tom would change his mind.

It worked.

"Tell you what," Crowpaw said once they were on the grey path that led to the camp. "Quartz told us we would have the day off from training tomorrow. Why don't we go on an adventure?"

It wasn't quite what Dewkit had been hoping for, but it was a tempting proposition nonetheless. As they entered the camp, he immediately spotted Cinderblossom, whose tail flicked happily as she noticed her kit's return.

Dewkit's heart sank. "I don't think Cinderblossom would let me out of her sight if she knew I was exploring the Twolegplace."

Crowpaw flicked an ear dismissively. "Leave that to me."

// I've decided I'm going to change my update schedule for the summer... Which means you get two chapters a week now! I'm doing July Camp NaNoWriMo with this story so that will force me to keep writing. Since there are two POV's, Dewkit chapters will come out on Wednesdays (a day early this week because the first update was on Friday instead of Sunday) and Lightpaw chapters will come out on Sundays.

// chapter 2 //

Leaves rustled. A bird called. Sounds of scurrying travelled through the forest.

That was far from what she was looking for. The every day sounds of the forest would do very little to help her corner her prey. She listened closer.

The hurried beating of a heart as a shrew ran past. The quiet flutter of wings as a magpie settled in the tree above. The swish of air as her own tail flicked in frustration.

Get it together, she growled to herself. Her body stilled, her muscles tensed, and her ears pricked up higher than ever.

Still nothing.

She nearly cursed – but then she heard it. The soft patter of footsteps.

By the time the tom came into view her legs were burning with the discipline required to stay still. Absolutely motionless, down to the end of her tail and the tips of her claws. She scolded herself as she realized she was grinding her fangs together with the anxiety of waiting.

He came closer, ears up and nose twitching but never once seeming to notice her. She held her breath.

She saw him start with surprise as she burst out of the bushes, but he recovered quickly. She was ready for him, swiping aside the paws the reached out to stop her, and hit her mark – his chest – just as originally planned. The tom fell beneath her and in one quick movement her fangs were at his throat.

"Alright, alright, I get it, you won this time." He was terribly out of breath.

"Just had to make sure, Flamestrike," she replied, letting him up. Settling before him, she wrapped her speckled tail over her white paws.

He took a moment to shake out his ginger fur before turning to her. "That was very well done, Lightpaw. I had no idea you were there." She puffed out her chest proudly.

"Only four moons into my training too," she pointed out. "Do you think I'll be a warrior soon?" Her hazel eyes widened with excitement at the thought.

Flamestrike purred. "Perhaps. But there are still many things you need to learn. Dawnstar is widening the training regimen and wants apprentices trained in many more skills than they were before the rebellion."

The rebellion. Lightpaw shivered.

"Nothing to worry about," her mentor continued. "Based on how well you're already doing, you should have the rest of your skills in no time."

The pale tortoiseshell brightened at that, bouncing to her paws. "Can we do more training today?"

The ginger tom lifted his head to the sky, visible through the gaps in the fire-coloured leaves above. "It's well past sunhigh. We should be getting back. Spiderthorn wanted us on a border patrol at dusk."

Lightpaw nodded, disappointed but knowing her duty to the Clan came first.

"Practice your stealth on the way back," Flamestrike suggested. "Let's see how quiet you are when you're on the move."

Eager to please, the apprentice softened her footsteps.

//

The camp was busy at this time of day, caught in that moment

between the return and departure of patrols and mentors with their apprentices. Lightpaw noticed Duskwhisker and Newtfang entering the camp with Stormpaw and Yewpaw in tow, both apprentices looking tuckered out by their day of training.

"Go talk to the other apprentices about training," Flamestrike said, following her gaze. "There's a lot you could all learn from each other." He padded off to join Dapplefrost and Smoketalon near the warriors' den.

On her way to the apprentice den, Lightpaw stopped by the freshkill pile to pick out a robin. They were her favourite, though they had grown scrawny as leaf-fall progressed.

Mouth stuffed with feathers, she became aware of eyes on her and turned to the Speaking Rock. Dawnstar and Spiderthorn sat together, sharing tongues, but kept a watchful eye on the Clan all the same. Lightpaw dipped her head respectfully to the leader and her mate before continuing on her way.

Beetlepaw already had a half-eaten mouse before her and did not even look up as Lightpaw approached. The tortoiseshell cleared her throat as she settled down beside her.

"Tough training today?" she asked.

The dark she-cat nodded, tearing into the remains of the mouse. "Tell me about it. Dapplefrost nearly clawed my ears off."

Lightpaw looked up at the older tortoiseshell, noticing how close together she and her own mentor sat. Dawnstar had announced their life-long pairing only a moon ago, along with Oakshade and Thistleshade's, and Blackstrike and Minkfur's.

"I finally got Flamestrike today," Lightpaw said, trying her hardest not to boast. "He didn't even hear me coming."

Beetlepaw grunted in response, a little bit grudgingly, and Lightpaw resolved to keep quiet. Her sister had always been abrasive, and her competitiveness had only increased when they became apprentices.

"I'm ready to curl up in my nest." Yewpaw flopped down next to Lightpaw, Stormpaw settling down on his other side.

"Spiderthorn worked me to the bone," Rainpaw admitted, flinching as she joined them. One of her back legs seemed strained.

Beetlepaw snorted. "Just wait until our first assessment. After that, the skills they teach us will only get harder."

Stormpaw gave his sister a sharp look. "Dapplefrost is hardly as demanding a mentor as Spiderthorn." He shifted closer to Rainpaw, taking his freshkill with him.

At the mention of the deputy, Lightpaw looked up at the Speaking Rock. Spiderthorn had disappeared, most likely to organize dusk patrols, but Dawnstar continued to hold her head high. Their eyes met – amber against hazel, narrowed against wide-open – and the apprentice looked away. They were spitting images of each other aside from that one, seemingly crucial difference.

She now found herself looking at Flamestrike, who waved his tail to call her over for their patrol. Behind him, Dapplefrost snickered at a comment Smoketalon had made, her head tilted cockily.

"I'm off for patrol," Lightpaw told the other apprentices. Stormpaw and Rainpaw nodded, Yewpaw waving his tail in farewell. Beetlepaw yawned.

"Don't choke on those mouse bones," the tortoiseshell added, a sudden surge of spite for her littermate filling her. "Would be a shame if you didn't make it to your first assessment, wouldn't it?" Beetlepaw's eyes narrowed but Lightpaw was gone before she could retort. She felt guilty immediately.

The dusk patrol was comprised of Rowanstorm, one of the well-respected senior warriors, Oakshade, one of the Clan's best hunters, Shademask, a young, but loyal, tom, and Flamestrike and herself. From the way Rowanstorm scented the air, Lightpaw could tell they were heading for the sea cliffs first.

"The scent of leaf-bare is blowing in," the older tabby

commented. "The salt is much further inland."

Lightpaw lifted her own nose, sniffing. Her mouth filled with brine as the salt hit her. Shaking her head to clear it, she fell into step between Flamestrike and Shademask.

"I can't wait to see snow," she said, breath misting up in front of her as they neared the cooler air of the cliffs. She could vaguely remember the feel of snow, cold and crunchy underfoot, and the blinding white of the outside world.

"I'm sure you'll also love the cold and going to sleep on an empty stomach," Shademask deadpanned, effectively shooting down her enthusiasm. She remained silent until they reached the sea.

She had seen it many times before, but the sea never failed to take her breath away. The rhythmic crash of the waves, the way they shifted from pale to dark and, finally, crested over in a splash of white; it was so incredibly enchanting and absolutely life-threatening at the same time.

The cliffs were void of life, most of the sea birds already gone now that the leaf-bare winds had come. A couple of gulls called in the distance, struggling against the blustering zephyr.

The patrol turned back inland, travelling until rock became dirt and dirt gave way to grass, growing taller as the moved. Every so often, Lightpaw smelled the strong scent of DarkClan where the edge of the territory had been marked. The scent was strongest on top of a mountain of dirt, the soil not quite settled from when it had been churned up.

Lightpaw had always wondered what the marker meant but knew that asking about anything that concerned DarkClan's past might result in punishment. Since the rebellion, the past had been a touchy subject with Dawnstar and, as far as Lightpaw was concerned, it was easier to stay silent than incur her wrath. Cherrypool had tested the DarkClan leader only once and now the entire Clan steered clear of that sort of talk.

Yet, she couldn't ignore the way Oakshade dipped his head at the

mound of dirt as they passed, marking it with his scent. She pushed her curiosity away.

The plains were quiet too, though a scrawny hare crossed their path too quickly for any of them to catch it. Lightpaw remembered Shademask's earlier words and glanced his way. He was watching her in that silent way of his. She wondered if he was thinking about the same thing.

"Looks like we should head back to camp," Rowanstorm decided as they approached a stone amongst the grasses, a small clearing around it. Here and there, holes in the ground suggested the area was rich with rabbits; the stale scent told Lightpaw that the burrows were abandoned, and had been for moons.

And then, a different scent hit her nose, quite unlike anything she had ever smelled but familiar at the same time. Something dusty, a wisp of a passing wind, that left her throat feeling ashy and dry. It was not a natural smell, but the scent mixed with it, heavy with grief and bitter with anger, reminded her of someone she hardly remembered, someone she had been told to forget.

They had all been ordered to forget. Forget the stories, the lies told to them by a cat who wished to overturn the rightful order of the world. Only Heatherfur's story remained true, untwisted by his words.

But everything else was wrong. Everything else was meant to make them weak.

Even before she became an apprentice, Lightpaw knew things were changing in DarkClan. Not too long after the night of the rebellion, Dawnstar announced that she had been visited by Heatherstar in a dream, telling her of the things that DarkClan needed to do to remain strong.

The life-long pairings were announced first. Based on their strengths, members of the Clan were to be paired before their sixteenth moon of life to ensure strong lineages within the Clan.

Then, came the healer's position. Once a disgraceful post, it was

now filled by Reedpaw who did his best to heal any wound or illness. Without a healer, the Clan would perish, as it nearly had after the rebellion. Without a healer to take care of the wounded, many of the warriors became sick with fever.

Caretakers were also eliminated, though queens now only spent four moons with their kits before they were to be apprenticed.

And the truth-teller had ceased to exist.

That was the scent she recognized, that grief and bitterness that came with losing something important. Once, it had been more cheerful, sunny even, full of the sweetness of hope and the tang of excitement. It used to fill the nursery, once a day, intertwined with words that spoke of freedom, of love.

The words of a traitor.

Lightpaw looked at Flamestrike, wondering if he could smell it too. But the rest of the patrol had already moved on, padding back out into the expanse of swaying yellow. She took one last sniff but all she could smell was stale rabbit. Was she imagining things? She had to be.

Yet, her fur did not lie flat, even once she was tucked into the safety of her soft nest.

// It might be too early to ask, but I hope both POVs are interesting! Any Lightpaw fans out there? Or are there more Dewkit ones?

// chapter 3 //

The camp seemed busier than usual. Dewkit sat in the nursery entrance, watching the day begin. As always, the providers were out of the camp first, well-rested and ready to hunt for the group.

Mira and Indigo headed out together, white and black blurs as they rounded the corner to the Twolegplace. Dewkit remembered watching Indigo return to the camp with a rat the size of a pigeon, once, and his mouth watered at the thought. Leo followed, moving almost lazily. Bramblefire waited, then left in the opposite direction of the others.

With the trainees excused from training, the mentors had the day to themselves as well. Quartz sat in a bright patch of sunlight, speaking quietly to Lily, a white she-cat with splashes of blue and cream. They both seemed content, even though the wind turned colder every day.

Dewkit sighed, fluffing up his still kitten-soft fur. How long before he became one of the trainees? Before he became a mentor or provider? Before he could be free of the stuffy cardboard nursery?

"Ready for that adventure?" The little grey kit nearly jumped out of his fur. Crowpaw purred in amusement, golden eyes glittering.

"You bet!" Dewkit jumped to his feet, careful to keep his balance.

"I've hidden four things around the camp," Crowpaw explained, glancing around the dead-end alley as he did so. "A little bit of a scavenger hunt. Each item connects directly to a location in the Twolegplace; once you find all of my clues, you'll know where we're going!"

Dewkit cocked his head. "Why don't we just go there straight away?"

The trainee snorted. "That would ruin all the fun, wouldn't it?" Then, in a half-whisper, "It'll keep Cinderblossom off your tail."

The kit nodded, excitement fluffing his tail up to twice its size. "Where do I start?"

"This is your scavenger hunt, not mine," the black tom replied. "But I'm sure there are others who will give you hints." Dewkit scampered off before Crowpaw could say another word.

He knew there was nothing in the nursery, as he had been sitting at its entrance all morning, so he headed for the mentors' boxes first. They stood four storeys tall, one stacked atop the other, varying shades of brown and grey. Dewkit padded into the one closest to the ground and found it filled with soft grass and feathers.

What could Crowpaw have possibly hidden in the camp? For all Dewkit knew, Crowpaw could have placed the feathers here. But nothing seemed out of the ordinary, so Dewkit moved on to the next den.

His short sharp claws worked at the outside of the cardboard, hauling him up to the next box. He felt heavy and very clumsy, his two front paws holding most of his weight while his right back leg hung uselessly behind him. Heaving himself into the next den, he collapsed, breathing heavily.

When he opened his eyes, there, right in front of him, lay a very strange feather. It was blue and white with small black specks and an almost silver sheen. Sniffing at it, Dewkit found he could not identify the scent.

"Never seen a jay's feather?" The kit jumped back, not having realized there was anyone in the den. The grey tom before him uncurled himself, revealing long fangs as he yawned.

Dewkit nearly groaned. *Of course Crowpaw would hide a jay's feather in Jaystrike's den.*

"Must be nice to have a friend like Crowpaw," the warrior continued. "Otherwise, you'd be stuck in that cardboard nursery of

yours." Dewkit cocked his head, unsure of what the warrior meant. His voice was cheerful enough, but there was a note of wistfulness in its background.

"Crowpaw's a good friend," Dewkit agreed, grabbing the feather. "And he's got more surprises for me!"

He placed the feather in the nursery and headed for the medic's den next. Lily was still bathing in the sunlight with Quartz and Dewkit did his best to steer clear of them; the pale she-cat could be very touchy if she found someone in her herb storage. Mothpelt was not much better, but he knew she would be visiting with Cinderblossom at this time of day.

He realized his mistake when he entered and was suddenly assaulted by thousands of scents. They left bitter tastes in his mouth and stirred his nose with their sweetness. Some had a tang that seemed to stick to his fur. His resolve to never become a healer strengthened the longer he stayed in the den.

But then, he saw it. Tucked away in a corner, surrounded by yellow and orange flowers, sat a single white pond lily.

Crowpaw, I may be a cripple but I'm not stupid, Dewkit thought as he snatched up the flower.

The other two clues he found easily. A stalk of indigo, vibrant against the greys and greens of cardboard and grass, he found in Indigo's nest; Webpaw's den, though he couldn't be sure, held a single cobweb, neatly laid out across the entrance.

A jay's feather, a waterlily, a stalk of indigo, and a cobweb.

Dewkit stared at the four items, neatly laid out in front of him. The sun caught the web, its silver strands glistening.

"Looks like you're trying to solve a mystery." A shadow fell over the four items.

"Crowpaw left me a puzzle to solve," Dewkit explained. "These four clues will lead me to him." He glanced up at the tabby tom on his right, wondering if the alley cat leader would mock him for his

games. He had seen some of the trainees snickering as he raced about camp earlier.

"A fine trainee, that Crowpaw," Bronco said, and the nearby group of Hazel, Finch, and Soren quickly averted their gazes. "Unfortunately, I have absolutely no idea as to where these clues may lead. Condor, any suggestions?"

Dewkit felt himself grow smaller as Bronco's companion stepped forward. Though the alley cat leader was not small by any means, he was dwarfed by his second-in-command. The giant of a tabby stepped forward, single amber eye narrowed; the other remained closed, marred by an ill-healed scar. Dewkit looked away quickly.

"A waterlily," the tom said. "Perhaps the pond by the willow?"

His words caught the attention of a couple of others in the clearing. Dewkit nodded, ignoring their stares.

Then, to his great surprise, they were joined by another.

"It must be," Mira said, pawing at the jay's feather. "Jays love that willow."

"And look," added Lily, flicking her tail at the indigo. "There are many bushes of that there."

Beaver thumped his thick tail on the ground as he sat down before the four clues. "I can tell you for a fact that I've walked into more than one cobweb in that area." Dewkit purred; Beaver was well-known for his clumsiness.

The pond by the willow. "How do I get there?" he asked.

Bronco scanned the camp, as if searching for someone. Then, as if he had determined the coast was clear, he leaned forward.

"Why not just follow Crowpaw's scent?"

//

Even as he neared the willow pond, Dewkit couldn't shake that

feeling of foolishness he'd felt at Bronco's suggestion. He had been so focussed on solving Crowpaw's clues that he had completely forgotten about something as simple as following his scent. He could still see the smug looks on Finch's and Soren's faces.

Crowpaw's smell grew stronger as Dewkit approached, leading him straight to the willow tree. The bushes of indigo around it swayed in the slight leaf-fall breeze, echoing the movements of the willow's soft branches. Sure enough, a cobweb's strands shone in the dusk light.

"Crowpaw?" the kit called softly.

He nearly yowled as someone grabbed him from a burrow beneath the roots of the willow. Their tail was in his mouth and Dewkit bit down, fighting his way out.

"Ouch!" Crowpaw's voice in his ear made Dewkit whirl around.

"What in StarClan's name are you doing?" the kit hissed. "Are there beetles in your brain?"

Crowpaw snickered quietly, though the alarm did not leave his eyes. "I wonder what your mother would say if she heard you."

The sound of footsteps came to Dewkit then, suddenly loud in the peaceful clearing.

"How many do you hear?" Crowpaw asked, eyes on the entrance to their hiding place.

The grey tom strained to hear something more. There were two for sure, padding along slowly. And – a third? But the rhythm was off, as if they were limping.

"You can't keep running off like that," said a she-cat's voice. Dewkit and Crowpaw exchanged a glance. It was Cinderblossom.

"I'm not running off." The response was gruff and bitter. There was only one cat who sounded like that, and Dewkit knew it had to be Nightchaser.

"No, you're attempting to spy on them," came a new voice. It was more poised and had a certain authority to it. This one Dewkit could not place.

"And spraining his paws in the process!" Cinderblossom hissed. "Have you no sense? What if they catch you?!"

Nightchaser growled back. "Then I die."

"And what good are you to us dead?"

"Better than alive it seems."

"How can you say that?!"

"Don't you think I know how they see me?!"

The trio were silent and the hollow in which the trainee and kit hid was suddenly full of erratic heartbeats. Dewkit swallowed, hoping no one would hear them.

Nightchaser's shallow, pained breathing reached them. "A failed rebel leader, that's what they see. They see someone who put everything they had into a single operation that fell apart before it even started. I'm the reason so many of their own are dead – Aurora, Flynn, Alder, Karina."

"You can't blame yourself – "

"Yes, I can!" A jay called in the willow, taking off in a flurry of wings as Nightchaser's voice rose to an even higher volume. "And I can blame myself for the deaths of many others too – Pebblefur, Lionmask, Cedarheart, Swallowstorm. Even that loner we dragged into camp to appease Dawnstar. Snailwhisker, and Goosepelt, and Wren – "

Nightchaser stopped there, as if suddenly overcome.

"Wrenflight," Cinderblossom finished quietly for him.

When Nightchaser spoke again, he sounded weary beyond his years. "I need to keep spying. I need to know what DarkClan is up

to. It's the only way to get my revenge and to atone for all of the deaths I caused."

"Then at least let us share your burden," the unknown figure said slowly, as if fearing another outburst from the tom. "There are others who will willingly spy for you. There are others who will willingly fight for you."

"I won't be responsible for their deaths."

"You can't fight DarkClan alone, Nightchaser."

Dewkit closed his mouth, realizing it was hanging open. The air was starting to turn cold around them and clouds of mist appeared before him every time he breathed. He was afraid his mother – or, worse, an angry Nightchaser – would notice them.

He waited for the conversation to continue, but the cats above said nothing more. A soft splash sounded and then even softer pawsteps as the trio retreated. Soon, only the jays could be heard, an almost haunting sound in the silence of dusk.

"We'd better head back to camp," Crowpaw urged, uncurling himself after a short while. The tom stretched his sore limbs before padding out of the hollow. Dewkit took a moment longer to collect himself, mind swirling with questions, none of which he had answers to. Were these the demons Crowpaw spoke of the other day? What had happened to cause the deaths of so many cats? Why did Nightchaser blame himself?

The only question he had an answer to was whether anyone would answer the previous ones. That answer was no.

He found himself shaking as he hauled himself up from the hollow. The sun was nearly below the horizon, the days much shorter now that leaf-bare was nearly upon them; Dewkit realized he had been outside of camp for some time. His paws felt like stone, much heavier than the crippled back leg he had become so used to.

Crowpaw stood a couple of foxlengths ahead, waiting. Dewkit took one last look around the clearing, noticing the way the

willow's feathery branches swayed and the ripples on the water glittered, framing the pond lilies in layers of shimmering circles.

The last thing he noticed was a peculiar sort of light, hidden in the indigo on the other side of the pond. The kit squinted, trying to make it out, and nearly jumped back as realization hit him.

Those white-rimmed golden eyes could belong to one cat only.

// I should really stop procrastinating and get to writing the next chapter... I wrote a chapter a day the first 3 days of Camp NaNo and now I haven't even touched the document for a week :/ But never fear! I will still have an update for you on Sunday, as usual.

// chapter 4 //

Another tough day of training. Another slow return to camp, paws dragging against the cold ground. Another visit to the healer's den, shoulder throbbing.

Lightpaw hated training with Smoketalon.

The heady scent of lavender made her dizzy as she stepped through the den entrance, suddenly enveloped in a seemingly alternate world. The outside world was cold and fast and dangerous; here, there was nothing but peace and quiet.

"Just a moment!" Reedpaw must have smelled her. Lightpaw settled into a half crouch, shoulder aching too much to allow her a comfortable position. It felt strained, as if the muscles underneath her speckled fur were threatening to pull apart. The smallest of gashes peered out from beneath a patch of cream, strikingly dark.

The new healer took one look at her and shook his head. He could no doubt smell Smoketalon's scent on her and, besides that, it was not the first time Lightpaw had visited him after a particularly trying training session.

"Looks like it'll need something to bring down the swelling," Reedpaw muttered to himself as he examined the scratch. "Maybe something to prevent infection."

He spoke in questions instead of statements, as if asking her for confirmation. Lightpaw shook her head, unable to give him answers.

"Is it dock for infections? And marigold for swelling? Or maybe horsetail?" She watched the tabby disappear into the medicine storage, talking to himself. He rustled about before returning with a couple of herbs. He looked very nervous.

Lightpaw watched as he chewed up a marigold flower, spitting

the pulp onto her scratch. A dock leaf followed, covered in cobwebs shortly after to keep the herbs in place. She purred as he finished, hoping to boost his confidence.

Reedpaw still seemed torn.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," the she-cat assured him. "If anything, I wrenched it a bit. A bit of rest and I'll be as good as new!"

The healer shot her a grateful look. "I really don't know what I'm doing."

"You're without a mentor. I'm sure the rest of the Clan understands that. You're doing the best you can."

Reedpaw glanced down at his paws. "What if my best isn't good enough for Dawnstar?"

Lightpaw wrapped a speckled tail around the tom's shoulders. "I'd like to see her try healing her wounded warriors."

A brief flash of amusement lit up the tom's copper eyes. They darkened quickly. "I wouldn't say that within her hearing if I were you."

All playfulness gone from between them, Lightpaw nodded. She knew Dawnstar could be dangerous; she'd seen her punish Thistleshade with her own eyes when the warrior she-cat returned to camp without prey for a third day in a row.

"I'd better get back to sorting," Reedpaw said quietly. "I'm running low on some of the herbs, but I haven't figured out which ones yet."

He seemed so resigned that Lightpaw nearly offered to help him. Yet, she knew that the tom preferred solitude when he was to get work done so she merely waved her tail at him before limping her way out.

Heavy clouds had rolled in and the camp looked bleak and dreary despite the fact it was only sunhigh. Lightpaw hoped she wouldn't be asked to join a patrol; the weather and her injured

shoulder made her want to sleep until dawn.

"What's this?" The she-cat groaned as her sister's voice reached her. "Did you trip over your paws again, Lightpaw?"

The tortoiseshell gritted her teeth. "No, Smoketalon decided to play tough."

Beetlepaw rolled her eyes. "I never get scratched up when I train with him."

That's because he takes it easier on you. Lightpaw held her tongue.

"Your sisters fight a lot," Rainpaw commented to Stormpaw as they passed by, casting a wary glance at the two she-cats. Beetlepaw glared at the grey tabby and Rainpaw quickly averted her eyes.

Lightpaw sighed. "She's got a point."

The black she-cat bristled. "She doesn't need to point anything out. Staying quiet might serve her best if she doesn't want thorns in her nest."

"Clearly, someone put thorns in *your* nest," Lightpaw muttered.

She was not ready for the weight on her chest, nor the momentum that sent her crashing back. Her head and shoulders hit the ground hard and she yowled in protest.

"Get off me Beetlepaw!"

"Why should I?"

"Because I'm injured. And, besides that, you don't rule this camp."

"Oh? Is that because you rule it?"

"I never said that!"

"It was implied!"

Lightpaw struggled, angered by her littermate's words. How

could Beetlepaw think such things?

The weight disappeared suddenly and the pale tortoiseshell looked up to see a black tom standing over her. Behind him, Smoketalon appeared to be hauling Beetlepaw off.

"I trust there is a good explanation for why the two of you are being so disruptive?" Spiderthorn asked coolly. Lightpaw got to her paws, smoothing her chest fur with a swift lick before shooting a pointed look at her sister. The black she-cat looked murderous.

"Rainpaw said that the two of us argue a lot and I told Beetlepaw off for getting angry with her for it," Lightpaw said before Beetlepaw could comment. "And she attacked me for doing so."

"We weren't arguing, we were discussing Lightpaw's training," Beetlepaw shot back. "Smoketalon got her again and I just pointed out that he's never got me before."

Spiderthorn looked between the two apprentices, eyes flicking to Smoketalon once in the process. He seemed to be calculating the best course of action.

Finally, "Smoketalon, I'll be having words with you about your training style. I don't want any of these apprentices hurt before they get a chance at their assessments."

The deputy turned to Beetlepaw. "You and your sister do argue a lot, it's no crime for Rainpaw to say it. And as for Lightpaw's training injury, she's been practicing a more advanced move than you have."

Beetlepaw's amber eyes turned to slits. "You always take her side."

Before anyone could say another word, she stalked off. Lightpaw fought the urge to run after her and pummel her into the ground.

"I'll step up Beetlepaw's training?" Smoketalon asked quietly, watching the apprentice go.

Spiderthorn nodded. "I think that would be best."

Lightpaw scrunched up her nose. Beetlepaw wouldn't be able to handle the moves Lightpaw was learning; she could hardly pull off a twist mid-air and land on her feet, let alone twist, swipe, dodge, and land all at the same time.

"Lightpaw, walk with me." The deputy's command surprised the apprentice and she followed him as best as she could out of the camp.

To her relief, Spiderthorn led her no further than the river that separated High Rocks from the forest. It cut straight through the soil, travelling to a pond the others called Deathwaters. Lightpaw had never been there, or heard of its significance.

"Lightpaw."

The she-cat settled before the deputy, mimicking his posture. Spiderthorn sat straight-backed, paws tucked close to him and tail wrapped neatly over them. She noticed that his head leaned slightly to the left.

"Yes?"

The tom paused for a moment, eyes on the clouds far above.

"You are a bright, talented individual. You work hard, but things come more naturally to you than they do to others. Like battle training, for example."

Lightpaw kept her eyes trained on Spiderthorn's chest, taking in his words. She felt her muscles tense as he continued.

"Beetlepaw, on the other hand, needs to put every bit of herself into her training in order to pull off the moves you learn in less than three tries. You think she doesn't notice how easily these skills come to you?"

The tortoiseshell felt her jaw tightening, the telltale clench of her fangs as agitation filled her. Of course she noticed, but that didn't give Beetlepaw an excuse to be so rude.

"While Beetlepaw could certainly handle her jealousy in a better

way, there are ways you might be able to salvage your relationship."

"How exactly?" Lightpaw burst out crossly. "Every time I try to be remotely nice to her she makes some snarky comment or attacks me."

Spiderthorn's whiskers twitched and the tortoiseshell was almost certain it was with amusement. "I knew two toms once who were very much like you and your sister. One would pick on the other until the one being picked on stepped up and impressed his brother. He even ended up asking for his help in training."

"Why would I ask Beetlepaw for her help in training?" Lightpaw growled through her clenched fangs. "I'm better than she is, you said so yourself."

The deputy shook his head. "Suggest training together. Maybe critique her to help her build her skills."

"She'll think I'm purposely trying to make her look bad," the she-cat replied bitterly.

Spiderthorn sighed. "I know she's difficult. Take that from me not as your deputy but as your father. I can't fight your battle with her for you but I can give you every bit of wisdom I have."

Lightpaw nodded mutely, wishing very much that the tom could fight Beetlepaw off for her.

"I'll try," the tortoiseshell said finally. "But no promises."

The black tom dipped his head. "That is all I ask."

//

To her utter dismay, Lightpaw found herself on the dusk hunting patrol later that day. Spiderthorn took the lead, with Thistleshade and Oakshade close behind, Rainpaw by Lightpaw's side. The grey she-cat seemed quieter than usual, very different from her usual bubbly self, and kept casting wary glances in the direction of the tortoiseshell. Lightpaw ignored her, too preoccupied with the

throbbing in her shoulder and the knowledge that Rainpaw's side glances were a result of Beetlepaw's insolence.

The deputy led them to the forest, the territory most likely to hold prey this late into leaf-fall. The ground, dappled with leaves the colour of fire, held hiding places for all manner of forest dwellers.

"Think I can manage to catch a mouse?" Lightpaw asked Rainpaw quietly, suddenly eager to break their silence.

Rainpaw seemed surprised by the question, but warmed up immediately. "Even with that shoulder, I think you'll manage. I'll be lucky to catch anything at all."

The pale tortoiseshell frowned. "Don't say that. I'm sure you'll catch anything you find."

The grey she-cat whisked her tail playfully. "If either of us find anything at all. Come on, we're wasting precious hunting time."

Lightpaw twitched her whiskers and followed the tabby into the undergrowth, glad to have a friend. They crept forwards, Rainpaw slithering through the low-hanging branches of bushes so gracefully she almost looked like she was made of liquid. Lightpaw followed her path as best as she could, cringing at how loud she was in comparison. Her shoulder throbbed again.

Finally, the two came to a small clearing, barely two tail-lengths across. Rainpaw lifted her tail to signal a halt. The tortoiseshell stopped, right forepaw still in the air and immediately focussed in on the mouse before them. It was small and grey but every piece of freshkill counted.

Her grey stripes rippling like water, Rainpaw sank into a hunter's crouch. Lightpaw waited, forepaw trembling as she forced herself to keep still. She noticed how Rainpaw leaned slightly to one side a moment before the she-cat sprang. She landed a hair short of the mouse, startling it and sending it running for cover.

Lightpaw moved fast, slamming a paw down in front of the

mouse before it had time to reach the edge of the clearing. It reeled, terrified, scurrying in the opposite direction and straight into the waiting claws of Rainpaw.

"Thanks for that," Rainpaw said, the mouse dead at her paws.

"You lean slightly to the right when you go into your hunter's crouch," Lightpaw replied, inspecting her wound. "Makes the angle of your pounce slightly off from where you aim with your eyes."

"I do?" The grey she-cat looked thoughtful. "I wonder why Spiderthorn never noticed during training."

Assured that she had not re-opened the cut on her shoulder, Lightpaw cocked her head. How very unlike Spiderthorn to let something like that slip.

"Nice catch!" Two cats entered the clearing, one dark grey and one tabby brown. Both pairs of eyes shone with pride as they took in the sight of Rainpaw with her catch.

"I couldn't have done it without Lightpaw," the grey she-cat responded, wrapping her tail around the tortoiseshell's shoulders. Lightpaw felt herself grow warm at the sudden attention.

"It was nothing," she replied. "But the next one's mine." She twitched her whiskers at the other apprentice.

"Run along then," Thistleshade said warmly. "We don't have long before it's completely dark out."

"Still scared of the dark?" Oakshade teased, flicking his long tail at her.

The dark she-cat shook her head. "Not when you're here to protect me." Her voice dripped with honey-like sweetness but Lightpaw couldn't have been sure if it was meant to be a compliment or an insult. She supposed it could be either or – the two were life-long mates, after all, and some form of affection might have surfaced. Still, DarkClan made it clear that love would not be tolerated.

Slightly uncomfortable, Lightpaw urged Rainpaw away, hoping to get the most out of their hunting trip.

By the time darkness fell, the two had caught only a scrawny magpie, its wing bent at an unnatural angle. Not a hard catch, but freshkill was freshkill.

"That will feed Minkfur and Antkit nicely," Rainpaw said kindly as they walked back to camp, the mouse swinging from her jaws.

Lightpaw's thank you was muffled by the assortment of feathers in her mouth, but she found she did feel grateful for the grey she-cat's words. Hunting with Rainpaw, as a team, had given Lightpaw some ideas about how she could take Spiderthorn's advice and repair her relationship with Beetlepaw – if there had ever been a time when they got along.

All of these hopes were dashed, however, when she stepped into the nursery to see Beetlepaw offering a large crow to Minkfur and her kit. The brown queen looked absolutely ravenous and tore into the freshkill without a second thought.

Before Lightpaw could retreat, Beetlepaw turned and spotted her. The tortoiseshell braced herself for the jibe that was sure to come.

And, sure enough: "That scrawny thing? Look what I caught at the cliffs today."

// I'm very happy with the character building in this chapter. Thoughts on any of these apprentices? Stormpaw and Yewpaw haven't had much facetime as of yet, but worry naught! For now, it was just time for the faes to shine :)

// chapter 5 //

"Coming along for some training today?"

Dewkit blinked up at Jaystrike, surprised by the invitation, but one look at the scowl on Cinderblossom's face told him there would not be any training until he became a proper trainee.

"No," he sighed, kneading the ground with his paws. He had already managed to create two sizeable indents in the time between dawn and sunhigh.

Jaystrike shrugged, continuing out of the camp with Crowpaw and Webpaw in tow. The black trainee looked apologetic, while Webpaw cast the two of them curious glances. Dewkit wasn't angry with Crowpaw; after all, it hadn't been his fault that he had chosen the place where Nightchaser, Cinderblossom, and Sprucetail – the third unnamed cat – held their conversation.

When Crisp and Oats came running up to him, cream tails pin straight with excitement, Dewkit did not have the heart to tell them that he had been confined to the nursery by his mother. They begged him to come with them but all he told them was that he was tired.

Even Quartz stopped by to ask if he would be joining them. Cinderblossom's scowl only deepened and the head mentor left quickly.

"When will I be a trainee?" Dewkit sighed quietly. He had not intended for the grey queen to hear, but she answered all the same.

"If you want some trainee work to do then I'm sure Mothpelt and Lily wouldn't mind having you in the healer's den," she said sharply. "Step one foot out of camp before you become a full trainee and you won't be leaving the nursery at all."

Dewkit narrowed his hazel eyes but didn't argue. Having free reign

of camp was much better than being confined to this stupid box.

Grudgingly, he began to pad across the clearing, from one corner of the camp to the other. The providers, trainees, and mentors were out for the day leaving only the queens, healers, and some of the higher-ups behind. He could see Roxanne and Condor sitting guard at the end of the alley in case of intruders, and Bronco's voice echoing quietly as he spoke with Sprucetail. Birchfrost sat on her own, back against red brick and white stomach exposed to what little sun was left.

What to do? He could go to Mothpelt and Lily in the healer's den, as Cinderblossom had suggested. Or he could go bother Bronco to teach him some fighting moves – but, on second thought, staying clear of Sprucetail might be a better idea. Birchfrost would let him hang around; he liked her because she had a limp, just like him.

Before he could make up his mind, Dewkit felt the tiniest of pinpricks on his forehead. It felt soft and wet and slightly cold. Gazing upwards, he saw the grey sky and, out of that sky, little flakes of white. There were not many at first but their numbers grew the more he stared.

What is this? he wondered. Every time one touched his fur he felt that same prick of wetness and cold. It wasn't unpleasant, just unusual. He tilted his head up and opened his jaws, trying to catch the drifting flakes. They were cool and refreshing.

He noticed one of the flakes had settled on the ground near his paws and he jumped back from it. It continued to lay there, shimmering. When he reached out to paw at it it disappeared.

"Snow." Dewkit whipped around to see Birchfrost watching him with her mismatched eyes – one blue and one gold.

"Snow," he repeated in awe. There was more of it now, larger flakes drifting down in the same lazy fashion.

"Leaf-bare has come." The grey and white she-cat rose to her paws, stretching. Her fur parted to reveal a pink scar that ran from her shoulder to her flank, curving over her side and belly.

"But the trees still have their leaves," Dewkit pointed out, tearing his eyes away from the scar. "Some are still green." Cinderblossom always told him that the trees changed colour before losing their leaves, and that was how they knew leaf-bare was coming.

Birchfrost gazed up at the greyness above grimly. "It's an early one this year."

The gravity of an early leaf-bare was lost on Dewkit as he realized the ground of the alley had very quickly turned white. It coated every mouselength of the camp, not a single spot of brown visible beneath the thin sheet.

The grey kit took it upon himself to rescue the camp floor and began to pad back and forth across the alley. His pawprints left brown patches in the blanket of white but, no matter how quickly he raced this way and that the snow fell faster. By the time he reached the end of the alley, his starting point was once again covered in white.

"You'll need to be quicker," Roxanne urged him. Condor looked at her in disbelief and Dewkit caught the grizzled tom looking pointedly at his stunted back leg. Determined to prove the tabby wrong, Dewkit raced away.

He tripped over his own paws within the first stretch, tumbling across the camp floor. He landed with a grunt of pain, Condor's snort from the other side of the alley still audible. Dewkit heaved himself to his paws and turned to see his progress.

He gasped. Of course!

Face screwed up in determination, Dewkit lurched forwards before purposely tumbling tail over paws into the snow. He purred as he saw the kit-sized patches he left in his wake.

After that, getting rid of the snow became much easier.

It was around dusk that the flakes became larger and more drop-like. Disappointed that his fun was over, but not wanting to get wet in the sudden downpour, Dewkit retreated to the nursery where

Cinderblossom promptly scolded him for the mud in his fur. Gazing at his reflection in the puddle outside the den entrance, Dewkit saw a completely brown kit staring back, fur sticking out all over.

"Where did the snow go?" he asked forlornly, watching the rain pelt the camp.

"I guess it's not cold enough," Cinderblossom replied between licks. "It only snows in leaf-bare, so perhaps leaf-fall is not yet over."

Still, Dewkit could not hide his disappointment. He fell asleep to thoughts of jumping through piles of snow, his fur coated in white.

//

He awoke to something wet hitting his nose. Blinking his eyes open, Dewkit watched as a single drop hit him squarely between the eyes. He sneezed, his entire body shuddering.

"Dewkit?" Cinderblossom's mumble came from his right. She was curled up around him, her head tucked in neatly under a paw. She blinked open her eyes, the dark pupils widening as she took in the den.

"There's water leaking in," she whispered, getting to her paws and whisking him out of the nursery. Dewkit sneezed once more as the coolness of the air outside hit him and the mud beneath his paws soaked into his fur.

There were others already gathered in the centre of the camp, some shivering and others coughing. In the darkness, Dewkit could just make out the dark figures of Bronco, Condor, and Sprucetail checking the remainder of the dens.

A flash of light lit up the sky for the briefest of moments and Dewkit started back, stepping all over Birchfrost's paws. The old she-cat did not reprimand him, only wrapped her tail around him as the thunder rolled over them.

Then, before their eyes, the stacked dens of the trainees began to collapse, first the bottom one crumpling to the ground and then the others, twisting in on themselves as the cardboard gave way to the

rain.

"Crowpaw's still in there!" cried Sprucetail as she padded up to the assembled cats.

Crowpaw. His friend, Crowpaw.

Without a moment's hesitation, the kit darted forwards. He could see something moving beneath the mountain of soaked boxes, struggling to get out. The more the shape moved, however, the lower the boxes fell, their weight too much.

Through that shifting cardboard Dewkit saw the hole. It was just large enough for a kit to fit through, if he made himself as flat as possible. His hind leg dragged on the ground behind him but, if he put on just one more burst of speed, he would be able to make it there before anyone else did.

He gave a mewl of distress as someone pulled him back. "Crowpaw's in there, I have to save him!"

The single eye that met his was neither kind nor cold. "We have to save him, not you alone."

Condor released him, stepping over him to get to the collapsed dens. With a swipe, he embedded his claws in the top layer and, with a mighty heave of his shoulders, dragged the box off. The remaining ones folded in further, as if eating themselves up.

"Get back to your mother," came a growl from behind Dewkit but the grey kit felt as if the mud were sucking him into the ground and holding him prisoner. He stayed put as others rushed forwards – Beaver, swiping at boxes with his thick tail; Bronco, pushing with all his might; Sprucetail, grasping layers between her teeth and pulling; Jaystrike, calling out Crowpaw's name. All the while, Crowpaw struggled beneath the boxes' weight.

The longer Dewkit watched, the more futile the rescue seemed. Every time Sprucetail pulled the wet cardboard with her teeth, it broke and left her spitting it out. Condor's claws began to rip through the boxes, breaking them apart but not easing the load; if

he sank them in any deeper, he risked hitting Crowpaw.

"We need to work together!" Dewkit did not know where the command came from but everyone halted.

"What do you suggest we do?" Jaystrike asked, a note of panic in his voice.

Nightchaser stepped forward. "We find a way underneath and ease it up. It's the only way to move it at this point."

Dewkit longed to help but fear for his friend kept him still. Instead, he watched as Bronco nodded to the others and ducked a paw into the hole Dewkit had spotted earlier. On the other side, Sprucetail did the same. Together, they strained to lift and the layers slowly shifted.

Condor and Beaver stepped forward, easing their own paws under. When they had shifted the mountain a mouselength higher, Roxanne and Nightchaser, both smaller than the others, dipped their heads underneath, sliding their shoulders in to take the weight of the load. Dewkit watched in amazement as the two cats slowly straightened their legs, lifting the destroyed dens.

A frightened and soaked, but very much alive, Crowpaw shot out, nearly colliding with Dewkit in the process. The mountain of cardboard crashed down to the floor as the others abandoned their posts, splashing them all with mud.

Everyone was silent as the rain continued to fall around them.

Nightchaser stepped forward first. "What do we do now, Bronco?"

The tabby leader surveyed the dead-end alley with alarmed eyes. "We make camp for the night elsewhere. Tomorrow, we travel to Tumble-down Den."

// A little bit shorter than usual but still enough to cover everything I wanted to in this chapter. What do you think Tumble-down Den is? Will the journey there bring new adventures for Dewkit?

// chapter 6 //

The mud squelched beneath her paws as she moved across camp, still yawning though the last traces of dawn were quickly fleeing from the sky. Rain always made her sleepy and it had been storming since moonhigh. The clouds were finally clearing now but the result of a night's rain showed prominently.

Most notably in the muck now sticking to her white underbelly. Lightpaw had just gotten out of her den and she already wished it were dusk.

"Doing alright there?" Lightpaw stifled her yawn as the amused purr reached her and she looked up to see Skunknose and Rowanstorm, two senior warriors. Like her, Skunknose had picked up a few patches on his black and white coat; Rowanstorm, on the other hand, regarded both of them with scorn. His tabby coat was pristine.

"Is it true our warrior assessments are coming up?" Lightpaw asked excitedly, knowing Rowanstorm was renowned for his mentorship. He had been Flamestrike's mentor, after all.

Before Skunknose could respond, the tabby cut in. "Only your mentor is allowed to disclose that information." His amber eyes were hard, letting her know he would not yield to pestering.

She cut her losses. "Guess I should just keep up my training." The tortoiseshell left the two senior warriors quickly but felt the scrutiny of Rowanstorm's gaze all the same. Some members of DarkClan really knew how to get under her fur.

"Need help licking yourself clean already?" Speaking of.

Lightpaw rolled her hazel eyes. "Maybe later tonight," she replied, deciding to be civil. "I still have lots to do today. I'm hoping for a hunting patrol."

"Hunting?" Beetlepaw scoffed. "I'm working on my leap-and-hold with Dapplefrost and Rowanstorm."

Which I've already perfected, Lightpaw thought sullenly. "I need to work on my stealth," she said instead, shrugging.

For once, the black she-cat did not respond, seeming to have nothing to pick on. The pale tortoiseshell nearly breathed a sigh of relief. Before either could continue the conversation, Spiderthorn approached them.

"Nice to see you two getting along," he mewed. Lightpaw flicked an ear, trying to look the part. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Beetlepaw bare her teeth.

"Beetlepaw, Dapplefrost decided you should clear out the nursery and warriors' den before training," the deputy continued. "Last night's rain seeped in and the nests are wet. Rainpaw will be helping you. Lightpaw, hunting patrol – Oakshade will direct you."

The she-cats exchanged a look, Lightpaw's triumphant and Beetlepaw's downright murderous.

"Have fun training!" Lightpaw called as she bounded off.

//

As it turned out, being stealthy following a rainstorm was impossible. Nearly everywhere Lightpaw stepped, mud bubbled up between her toes, accompanied by all manner of gurgling, splashing, and squelching. Yewpaw was not having much luck either.

"We either need to coat ourselves in this gunk," he hissed between his teeth as he pushed his belly closer to the ground, "or put up with all the noise."

"I don't think we have much of a choice," the she-cat replied, lowering her body. Her belly fur was already coated in brown, what could a few more splatters do?

The golden tom remained silent, putting his full concentration

into placing one paw in front of the other without making a sound. Lightpaw followed suit.

By the time they reached the forest ravine, both of their pelts were mottled with chocolate and Lightpaw's claws felt heavy as stones with the mud clinging to them. Her shoulder, still not completely healed, ached from pushing against the unsteady ground.

Both apprentices, however, still had not managed to be silent.

"We're going to be here all day," Duskwhisker announced, flicking his tail at Yewpaw. "You both need to be silent as owls by the time we leave."

"Why isn't Flamestrike here to mentor me if this is so important?" Lightpaw huffed, stretching out her sore limbs.

She nearly jumped back at the stare Duskwhisker fixed her with. "Flamestrike had more important things to attend to."

The pale tortoiseshell nodded, not wishing to cross the dark tom. He was disagreeable at the best of times. She wondered how Yewpaw, generally quiet and somewhat skittish, put up with him.

"Duskwhisker, no need to be rude," Thistleshade admonished him. Lightpaw marvelled at the she-cat's bravery but, to her surprise, the black tom only bowed his head.

"Perhaps we should hunt," Oakshade suggested. "That is, after all, why we're here. You two can practice your stealth while hunting, I trust?"

Both Lightpaw and Yewpaw nodded their heads enthusiastically. His friendliness made him easy to be around and neither wanted to let him down.

They split up, Yewpaw following Duskwhisker off to the east and she to the west, right behind Thistleshade and Oakshade. Last night's rain still clung to the forest like burrs and the soft *drip, drip* of water became the only sound besides her pawsteps.

She focussed her hearing. The dripping receded and the otherwise silent forest enveloped her senses, the silence so heavy she felt it pushing her deeper into the mud underpaw. How could it be that not a single critter stirred now that the rain had stopped?

Her ears pricked, she prowled forward, clenching her teeth in concentration. Paw up quickly and then back down slowly, creating as little noise as possible. Leaves rustled above her, dull and brown – a squirrel, or maybe a bird.

But the sound that caught her attention were two voices, somewhere in the undergrowth ahead. A wall of bramble kept her from seeing their owners, but her nose quickly identified them. She was downwind, thankfully.

"Rainpaw and Reedpaw are both fine apprentices," she heard Oakshade murmur. "Perhaps we should make good use of our life-long pairing."

Thistleshade purred in response. "Perhaps. But..." She paused, as if checking for eavesdroppers and Lightpaw tensed, alibi on the tip of her tongue.

"But?"

"Do you really want our next litter to grow up here?" Through a gap in the brambles, the pale tortoiseshell saw the warrior she-cat wave her tail at the surrounding trees.

Here. Lightpaw gazed up at the nearly bare branches, the last brown and orange leaves holding on for dear life. What was so bad about here?

Oakshade paused. "No, I don't."

The grey she-cat breathed a sigh of relief. "I don't either. I want them to be born free, away from this madness, where we can be with them as true parents. Where they can choose their own paths."

The pale tortoiseshell felt her teeth grit with shock. Surely, Reedpaw and Rainpaw had chosen their own paths? Antkit would choose his own when he grew to apprentice age too.

She couldn't be sure, but the longer she listened the more their conversation sounded like treason.

"Oakshade, you know I love you and that I desperately want more kits," Thistleshade continued quietly.

"But now is not the time," her mate finished for her.

Love? Life-long pairings were meant to produce strong kits and nothing more. Her hazel eyes wide, she backed away, no longer caring about her level of stealth, and turned tail. The wind had just turned and she hoped dearly the two warriors would not pick up on her scent.

//

The single mouse she managed to catch by dusk was too thin to make a good meal. She had stumbled upon a red-breasted robin after overhearing Oakshade and Thistleshade speaking, but their conversation continued to distract her. The robin flew away without a scratch.

Yewpaw, however, had managed to catch two robins, both decently large. He did not boast about his catch but he was not apologetic either. Lightpaw supposed he had earned his silent pride today.

Her own silence stemmed not from embarrassment but from her inner turmoil. The words 'path', 'love', and 'free' swirled about her head like bees, buzzing incessantly and refusing to abate. They were all treasonous in one way or another – was her knowledge of them treasonous as well?

She glanced up through hooded eyes at the pair in front of her, pawsteps synchronized with the other and bodies slightly closer than most would be comfortable with. Their tails swished as they moved, knocking against each other.

Something in her chest clenched. If she told anyone the words she overheard, terrible consequences would result. Would she be able to stand the guilt as it trailed her? Or would guilt shadow her

regardless?

Lightpaw shook her head. Nothing good ever came of secrets – Flamestrike told her that her first day of training. She intended to take her mentor's advice.

I know my duty to the Clan.

Yet, as she entered the camp and spotted Rainpaw and Reedpaw sharing a vole near the entrance to the medic's den, she once again felt the cloud of doubt descend. Would the two apprentices be punished too?

"Good catch," she heard Stormpaw say as he passed her by, heading straight for Yewpaw. The two brothers had always been close, even after Stormpaw began to spend more time with Rainpaw. The golden tom never once complained, content to spend time on his own and just as happy to be with Stormpaw once the grey tom returned.

"What about yours?" Lightpaw glanced at the two littermates by the medic's den one more time before turning to Stormpaw.

"Just a mouse," she said, placing it on the freshkill pile. Across the camp, Flamestrike looked her way before turning back to Newtfang and Smoketalon.

"Mud get you down?" Stormpaw replied teasingly, flicking his tabby tail over the dark patches mottling her otherwise pale coat.

The tortoiseshell shrugged. "Not my best day." They both knew she was a decent hunter on her worst days. She had never been so absentminded before.

Stormpaw nodded. "Next time, right?" She nodded back, glad for his support. Unlike her, he could always find the positivity in a situation.

"At least you get a next time." Reedpaw's appearance startled the two toms, as the medic hardly ever joined the other apprentices. "How's your shoulder?"

Lightpaw gave the healing wound a lick. "Almost as good as new."

Reedpaw's copper eyes reflected relief.

"Reedpaw is aggravated by his inability to hunt or fight," Rainpaw explained, taking a seat between Yewpaw and Stormpaw. Yewpaw shifted over good-naturedly.

Stormpaw's face took on a puzzled look. His question never reached the surface.

"Why would a medic need to know how to fight?" Beetlepaw padded up, fur covered in sludge. A hard day of training had not even so much as made a dent in her attitude.

"I was going to ask why he hasn't asked to join our training sessions," Stormpaw said under his breath, only loud enough for Lightpaw and Rainpaw, sitting on either side, to hear. "Nightchaser trained with the others as an apprentice."

A jolt ran through Lightpaw. "Nightchaser?" she whispered. Above her, Reedpaw patiently explained to Beetlepaw why hunting and fighting were good skills to have, even as a medic.

Stormpaw nodded. "He even asked Flamestrike to train him some nights so he could get better. Like Acornstar."

The tortoiseshell blinked. Of course, how could she have forgotten about Acornstar and Martenclaw and Pinefrost?

"Where did you hear that from?" she asked, too loudly.

"Oh, pay attention, will you?" Beetlepaw growled. "Smoketalon told me so."

"Told you what?" Lightpaw asked.

"That medics are a waste of prey and not worth the time to train," the she-cat replied. "Have you even been listening?"

The pale she-cat glanced between her littermate and the medic.

Reedpaw looked ready to fall into himself, his copper eyes full of hurt. Beetlepaw looked twice her size, gleaming with triumph.

"Smoketalon doesn't know anything," Lightpaw hissed, padding over to the tabby tom. "Without Reedpaw we wouldn't survive."

The tom flashed her a grateful look but remained hunched over, as if waiting for Beetlepaw's next barb. Rainpaw's fur had risen and only Stormpaw's tail over her shoulders seemed to be holding her back from throwing herself at the black she-cat. Yewpaw looked uncomfortable; he never liked it when the peace was disrupted.

"Medics are important." The voice was thoughtful, sweet yet full of poison at the same time. "Not as important as warriors, of course, but they play their part."

The apprentices parted – Lightpaw and Reedpaw on one side, and the rest on the other – as Dawnstar walked into their midst. She made Lightpaw feel so small, so insignificant, and by the way Reedpaw shivered beside her he felt the same way.

"Apprentices have their part as well," the DarkClan leader noted. "I believe that part is not bickering in the middle of my camp. If you don't find something useful to do I will be forced to assign you to cleaning dens."

Stormpaw got to his paws immediately, taking Rainpaw with him. Beetlepaw and Yewpaw exchanged a glance before slinking away. Reedpaw gave Lightpaw an apologetic look before taking off at a suspiciously quick pace. The tortoiseshell moved to follow the rest, thinking she might ask Flamestrike for some battle training now that her shoulder was feeling better.

"Not you," Dawnstar said. Her voice held no coldness but Lightpaw felt a shiver run down her spine. "We have something to speak about."

Path. Love. Free. Dread washed over her.

// I know this is a little later than usual, but here's my Sunday update! I actually just finished typing this out so if you notice

any mistakes please point them out (it's completely unedited).

// chapter 7 //

The day after the storm dawned bright and cool. The scent of rain lingered in the air, bringing with it a chill that accompanied even the warmest ray of sunlight. Dewkit fluffed up his fur, unsure how he felt about the weather. He liked it much better than last night's storm, that was for certain.

Crowpaw padded just ahead of him, head and tail low. The older trainees seemed to be avoiding him, as if he were a walking token of bad luck. They kept their distance, casting side-long glances at the black tom and trading whispered comments. Webpaw walked somewhere in between, part of the trainee group but not leaving her littermate behind.

Dewkit sighed. If only he could be part of that group. Or, better yet, running up ahead with Robin, Crisp, and Oats. His paws ached from the trek but the surroundings were enough to excite him and fuelled his paws with curiosity.

Beside him, Cinderblossom kept a watchful eye. He had no hope of escaping from under her wing. He resolved to keep his gaze focussed ahead of him, on Beaver's swinging tail.

But the world around him was unlike anything he'd ever seen. His paws ached to run and explore, to travel far away from the acrid scent of the Thunderpath they followed and find those gardens Leo liked to talk about, or a raccoon sifting through a Twoleg dump, or a grove of bare trees where he could tumble through a blanket of leaves.

Lost in thought, Dewkit felt his nose hit fur.

"Ouch," Beaver said, pulling his tail out from underneath the kit's paws. "Careful. We can't have two clumsy cats in this group." He twitched his whiskers as Dewkit.

"Sorry," the grey tom replied, looking sheepish. A soft whisk

across the head told him he was forgiven.

"Why are we stopped?" Roxanne called from the back of the group. Before leaving the destroyed camp, Bronco had decided to split the stronger cats between the front and back of the group, keeping trainees, queens, kits, and healers in the middle. Bronco, Nightchaser, Sprucetail, Leo, Indigo, Quartz, and Beaver took up the front; Roxanne, Condor, Mira, Fiero, Birchfrost, Bramblefire and Jaystrike brought up the rear.

"We need to cross this Thunderpath," Sprucetail called back. A shiver ran through the entire group. Dewkit's excitement only grew.

Indigo and Quartz sprang across first, followed by Leo and Sprucetail. They settled near the edge of the Thunderpath, like they were ready to spring.

A monster rattled past, filling the air with a putrid stench. Dewkit wrinkled his nose, coughing. Cinderblossom glanced at him, worry clouding her hazel gaze.

Olive, Hazel, and Soren made a run for it, followed closely behind by Beaver, Finch, and Webpaw. Dewkit shifted closer and closer to the Thunderpath.

Another monster, then one more. He heard them coming, their rough breath stirring the air long before they came into view. He felt them coming too, the pebbles near his paws jumping like grasshoppers.

Bronco and Nightchaser stood on either side of the group, keeping watch. At a nod from Bronco, Lily and Mothpelt pelted across, mouths filled with the herbs they managed to salvage from their cardboard storage.

It was his turn. Dewkit crouched, ready to spring forward.

"I'll take him across." Before Dewkit could protest, a strong mouth grasped his scruff and lifted his paws from the ground. Then, the ground beneath him became a blur and he was suddenly on the other side.

The kit glanced up to see Condor regarding him with his single eye. "Thank you," he mumbled, but only because Cinderblossom was eyeing him reproachfully.

The only other cat who required help getting across was Birchfrost. Flanked by Bramblefire and Jaystrike, she limped across. No monsters came to get her.

Finally, everyone stood on the other side.

"We'll need to take the fences," Bronco announced, looking up at the brown walls around them. To Dewkit, they looked as tall as trees.

"How much further?" Nightchaser asked.

The dark tabby weighed his answer. "We'll be there by dark." It was sunhigh.

Nightchaser's answer was clipped. "Will this camp last longer than the last?"

Bronco's amber eyes darkened and Dewkit shrank back. He hadn't ever seen the tom look like that.

"Our alley camp is a temporary one," he explained. "Storms like last night's are rare; the last was season cycles ago."

"So this has happened before?" Nightchaser's voice rose and Dewkit felt himself grow even smaller as he watched the exchange.

Indigo stepped forward, sapphire eyes strangely bright against her dark fur. "We've rebuilt it before. We'll rebuild it again."

"You're leading us further and further from the edge of the Twolegplace," Nightchaser hissed.

"Yes, and for good reason," Bronco growled back, though he kept his fur flat.

Dewkit's eyes felt wide as an owl's. *Why was the edge of the Twolegplace so important?*

Sprucetail stepped forward, taking a stance between the two toms. "I trust this new camp will keep us safe through leaf-bare and will let us continue our training?"

Bronco nodded. "More so than the previous one."

The dark she-cat nodded her thanks to the alley cat leader and turned to Nightchaser. She held his gaze, green against gold, until the tom finally gave a small nod of his own.

"We need to keep moving," Condor growled. "We don't want to be caught out on the Thunderpaths after dark."

Dewkit remained firmly rooted to the spot, still trying to process what had just happened. A slight push from Cinderblossom reminded him that they were moving again.

"After we get up on the fences, I'll let you go with the trainees," she said quietly. Her shoulders were tensed and her eyes clouded.

"Really?!" he squeaked, fear temporarily forgotten.

She nodded. "I'll ask Webpaw to watch you."

Webpaw, as far as Dewkit knew, was very easily distracted. The rest of this journey would be much more enjoyable.

//

Balancing atop the maze of fences took more concentration than Dewkit had anticipated. In front of him, Webpaw's striped tail bobbed up and down. She glanced back every so often, probably making sure he was still there. Cinderblossom would undoubtedly claw her ears if anything happened while Dewkit was under her watch.

"We should do some fence hopping!" Soren's voice rose into the air up ahead.

"I don't think that's a very good idea," Leo countered. "You'll get lost."

"Oh, come on," Soren whined. "You used to fence hop with us all the time when you were still a trainee!"

Dewkit saw Leo puff out his ginger chest. "I'm a provider now."

Olive, following Dewkit closely, let out a purr of amusement. In front of him, Webpaw scoffed derisively.

"Leo, the great provider!" she jibed. "He's too good for us lowly trainees."

The ginger tom stopped suddenly and Dewkit nearly ran into Webpaw. A steadying paw from Olive kept him from falling from the fence.

"Maybe I'm just too good for you *Clan cats*," he hissed.

It happened so quickly Dewkit could not have recounted the events. Webpaw's smug expression and three short slashes across Leo's nose were enough to tell the tale.

"Say that again and I'll claw it completely off," the she-cat said, flicking her tail across the tom's nose. Then, with a neat weave and a skip in her step, she stepped around Leo and continued on her way. He remained where he was, stunned.

Olive prodded Dewkit gently, urging him forward.

Clan cats? he wondered as he continued on his way, limp back leg dragging along the top of the fence. Could this possibly have something to do with what he had overheard Nightchaser, Cinderblossom, and Sprucetail speaking about?

He didn't dare ask about it with Leo in front of him, a hard set to his shoulders.

Ahead of them, Webpaw had taken up Soren on his game of fence hopping and they, along with Finch, Hazel, and Robin were now leaping through the air at every intersection of the maze. Dewkit glanced back at Olive and, sure enough, a reproachful look covered her features. Sometimes, she reminded him very much of his mother.

"You don't want to play?" he asked her.

Olive looked taken aback. "Why would I?" she said with a cock of her spotted head.

Dewkit shrugged. "It looks like fun. I wish I could play." He glanced at his back leg but continued to move himself forward. Olive had the good grace to look apologetic.

"I wish I had fences to play on when I was a trainee." The new voice belonged to Bramblefire, who padded up to them at an intersection. The tom was smaller than Bronco, but still growing in size. The stripes of his brown tabby fur disguised his muscles but Dewkit knew from experience that they were there; he had tried wrestling the older tom once.

Olive didn't answer. The air suddenly held a tension Dewkit couldn't quite place. He glanced between the two cats and noticed how much more at ease Bramblefire seemed. In fact, Olive looked like she were preparing to defend herself.

"How come?" Dewkit piped up, hoping to alleviate the pressure.

The question had the opposite result. "Growing up here just seems a lot more peaceful," Bramblefire grumbled, uneasiness in his stance.

"It *was* peaceful," Olive replied, scowling.

The tom looked taken aback.

"Lovers' spat?" Beaver purred, approaching the small group from a different direction. "Better resolve it quickly, otherwise you'll fall behind. Come on, get a move on."

The tom winked at Dewkit as he padded past, as if the two of them were in on some sort of joke. If they were, the kit didn't understand it.

Olive took off quickly, Bramblefire following more slowly. Dewkit suddenly found himself on his own, trying to keep up with the much faster cats. The air, much colder now, swirled around him

and pulled at his fur. He felt himself tip dangerously to one side and dug his claws deep into the dark wood beneath him.

Up ahead, he could see the trainees still playing at hopping fences. Even further up, the stronger cats continued steadily on. Glancing back, Dewkit saw nothing but empty fences.

Taking a deep breath and swallowing the tell-tale chill creeping into his throat, Dewkit pushed himself forward at a faster pace. He had to keep up with everyone; if he didn't, how could he possibly contribute to their group?

To his dismay, the fence tops grew more narrow as he moved and, once or twice, he happened upon a stretch of fence that felt no more solid than a puddle of water. He felt the wood creak under his weight, the slats leaning to one side and throwing off his already altered sense of balance. Taking a deep breath, Dewkit forced himself across.

The figures in the distance grew no bigger but, if optimism were to help him at all, they did not get smaller either. As long as he could see them, he would still be travelling in the right direction.

But, as the sun slowly dipped lower and finally disappeared behind the tallest Twoleg dens, Dewkit found it progressively harder to spot the others. The only light in the world now streamed from holes in the dens all around, harsh and unnatural.

"Wait!" he finally cried, swallowing his pride. How had they not noticed he was gone? Were they really so focussed on *Clan cats*, and *fence hopping*, and *peace* that a missing kit wasn't an issue?

He blinked and lost sight of the silhouettes. Cold fear filled him and he pushed himself harder, willing his paws to move faster, cursing his crippled leg. Was that why they were leaving him behind?

Cinderblossom wouldn't leave you, he thought, but the sentiment didn't make him feel much better. He was still very much alone, atop a maze of fences on a journey to who knew where.

The fence tops grew wider once more and some of his panic subsided. Was that someone up there turning back to get him? He squinted, but the darkness grew heavier and made it impossible to tell.

Distracted, he didn't notice the rotting wood until it was too late.

With a loud thud, he hit a surprisingly soft bed of leaves.

"Help!" he yowled, gazing up at the impossibly tall fence. How would they ever find him now?

The sound of a snapping twig made him wheel around clumsily, hazel eyes scanning the dark garden he had fallen into. The Twoleg den was very far away, the light coming from its openings not even close to reaching him. His breath came quickly, sides moving in and out at an alarming rate.

He stopped halfway through his inhale, nearly choking on the air. A cry escaped him as he registered the shape in front of him, big and bulky, and the bead-black eyes staring down at him.

The gleaming fangs moved closer.

// Oh no, Dewkit, what have you gotten yourself into?! D: As a side note, writing from Dewkit's perspective is tough because he doesn't know anything even though we do. I hope I'm doing alright with his confusion.

// chapter 8 //

As it turned out, Dawnstar could not read Lightpaw's mind.

Five sunrises later, however, as the tortoiseshell apprentice cleaned out yet another den she could still not wrap her head around the real reason why she had been pulled into the DarkClan leader's den, or why it warranted her imprisonment within the camp walls. Her lip curled at the thought.

Dawnstar believed Lightpaw had been stealing extra prey from the freshkill pile. There was only one cat who would make up such an outrageous lie to get her into trouble.

I'd rather actually be suspected of treason than forced to remain in camp because of Beetlepaw's pettiness, Lightpaw thought as she clawed savagely at the damp nest before her. Ribbons of moss flew right and left, raining down on her head. Her fangs clenched and she had to remind herself to breathe.

A few deep breaths later she felt ready to continue her work. Grabbing a mouthful of the moss, she padded outside.

"Watch it!"

The apprentice halted abruptly, unable to see where she was going. Putting the moss down, she found herself face to face with Shademask, his expression rather cross.

"Sorry," she mumbled, aware of the bits of moss between her teeth. The usually silent tom kept his eyes narrowed but flicked his tail all the same.

"Take on smaller loads," he suggested, already walking away. "You're stuck in camp whether you like it or not."

Lightpaw narrowed her eyes at the tom's back. It wasn't her fault Spiderthorn appointed him to keep watch over her punishment.

Like her, Shademask was stuck in camp for another two sunsets. At least he could sit around and do nothing.

Refusing to heed his advice, she picked up the entire load of moss once more, depositing it on the edge of the camp. Duskwhisker and Skunknose, on guard duty from sunhigh until sunset, sat with their fur fluffed up against the chill in the air. Away from the shelter of the tall rocks that surrounded the camp, the leafbare wind grew bitingly cold.

"Yewpaw just brought in some fresh moss," Duskwhisker mewed, pointing with her tail at a grey-green lump near her paws.

Yewpaw was the unlucky apprentice appointed to supply Lightpaw with the materials to carry out her punishment. For the past five days, the other apprentices were drilled on their battle technique and the loser of each session would be made to forage for moss or feathers or whatever else Lightpaw needed that day. Today was Yewpaw's fourth day; Rainpaw had lost once too.

"He's quick, that one," Skunknose commented. "And a good hunter."

"Good fighters are what we need," Duskwhisker replied, eyes on the grey sky up above. Lightpaw payed little mind to their words, gathering up the moss in one giant ball and heading back to the den she was cleaning.

She arrived at the log den without incident, despite the limited visibility caused by the moss in front of her. Though she didn't understand the point of cleaning out a den nobody used, she didn't dare complain. Seven days of being cooped up in camp was enough for her.

Still, the empty den aroused her curiosity. Who had slept here before it fell into disuse? Was it kept as a reminder of someone who had passed on?

The only thing she knew about this particular hollow log was that Spiderthorn sometimes spent his nights sitting atop it, gazing out in the direction of the Twolegplace.

Patting the last pawful of moss into place, the she-cat stepped back to admire her work. Perfect. She was almost tempted to spend the night here herself.

But she had one more den to clean, and that was the one beneath the Speaking Rock. She wrinkled her nose, already dreading Dawnstar's piercing stare watching her every move.

With a sigh, she resigned herself to her work. *Only two more sunsets...*

Rainpaw flicked her ear happily at her as she passed, a shrew in her jaws. Lightpaw knew she would be sharing it with Stormpaw. She also wondered if anyone else noticed how close the two apprentices had become in a matter of moons, and whether their relationship would withstand DarkClan's pairing system. If she were brave enough, she might even ask Dawnstar to put the two together.

Just the thought of entering the DarkClan leader's den made her fur rise, let alone asking her to secure her littermate's happiness. Did Dawnstar even care about Stormpaw's – or anyone's – happiness?

Lightpaw clenched her fangs and padded towards the den entrance. She could hear voices, but they grew softer the closer she got. Curious, she slid just past the lip of the den.

"They're on the move," a she-cat said. "Crossing to an abandoned den further into the Twolegplace."

"It will make it harder for them to spy," a tom added. "They will have to travel further to gather information about us, while we can continue to pick off stragglers."

A pause. Lightpaw held her breath, terrified of being heard. She didn't understand the specifics of their conversation but knew for certain that it did not bode well for DarkClan's enemies.

"We will continue with our raids." Dawnstar's voice, steady and cold, was easily recognizable. "Take anyone who has some sort of information on the rebels' whereabouts and tactics. Then, we can look into planting an inside source."

The two cats who had been reporting to the leader hastily muttered their approval and Lightpaw heard a shuffling of paws. In horror, she realized she would be caught should she remain where she stood; she couldn't erase her scent either. The only way to go was forward.

"Lightpaw." A confused-looking Shadowpelt looked down at her.

The pale apprentice nodded her head in greeting, heart pounding. "Is Dawnstar alone? I've come to clean our her den." The words, though true, felt muddy on her tongue.

"She is now," Newtfang said as he padded past. He did not look the least bit suspicious and Lightpaw felt herself relax.

"Sorry I nearly walked right into you," she said to Shadowpelt, as if she had arrived at the exact moment the two were leaving. The black she-cat accepted her apology with a nod and went on her way.

Lightpaw's hazel eyes blazed with triumph as she entered the den. Dawnstar payed her no mind, seemingly lost in thought.

When she finally noticed the apprentice, who had managed to take out the old moss and replace it with the fresh one supplied by Yewpaw, she looked nothing like the Dawnstar Lightpaw had come to know. She looked nothing short of exhausted.

"What are you looking at?"

The tortoiseshell apprentice flinched, avoiding the amber glare. Sometimes, she forgot that Dawnstar was Beetlepaw's mother – and her own, too.

//

The wind rushed past her whiskers as she jumped, keeping her body tight as she sailed over her opponent. She hit the ground and twisted without a heartbeat to lose. Swipe left, dodge right, quick jab to the chest. Beneath the determined look in her opponent's eyes she could see the beginnings of exhaustion.

The tom in front of her reared up and the she-cat bounced back, letting him crash down onto the hard-packed earth. With an almost dainty flick of her paw, she hit the side of his head. Then, she was on top of him, using her weight to keep him down.

"Alright, that's enough Lightpaw," Flamestrike called from the side of the Training Hollow. The tortoiseshell purred, letting Yewpaw up.

"I can never keep up with you," the golden tom managed to get out between heavy breaths.

"Not many can," the pale apprentice replied, puffing out her chest.

"Showoff," she heard Beetlepaw mutter from the sidelines. Today, Lightpaw didn't care. It was her first day back to training after seven days spent in camp and she was very happy to find she was still better than the others. Even Rowanstorm, normally critical, looked impressed.

"Yewpaw, you need to work on your speed and dodging," Shadowpelt said. "Duskwhisker, take note." The dark tom nodded respectfully to his former mentor.

"His strategizing also needs work," Rowanstorm continued. "Speed, technique, strength – those mean nothing if you cannot use them properly." His dark green eyes scanned the apprentices one by one, as if engraining his words in their minds.

Lightpaw took the dark tom very seriously. The number of apprentices he had trained for DarkClan held proof of his experience and the many scars lining his fur even more so. Glancing around at the others, however, she was surprised to see their varied states of neglect. Stormpaw and Rainpaw were making faces at each other; Yewpaw looked dejected; Beetlepaw yawned, stretching her long body.

"We'll head back to camp now," Shadowpelt continued. "Dawnstar wanted the Clan gathered at sunset."

Lightpaw glanced up at the bare tree branches to find them against

a background of ochre. Veins of lavender and pink broke the leafbare sky, pointing to the west where the sun had disappeared.

"You did well today," Flamestrike commented as he slid into step beside his apprentice. Lightpaw beamed up at him, pleased that he was noticing her progress.

"I'm surprised I did, considering I've been stuck in camp," she replied.

The ginger tom nodded, sidling closer. "For the record, I know you didn't steal prey. But, if you had tried, I think you would have gotten caught."

Though the tortoiseshell felt pleased that her mentor believed her innocent, she couldn't help but ask, "Why would I get caught?"

Flamestrike twitched his whiskers, but his tone remained serious. "Your battle skills may be sharp, but your stealth still needs a lot of work before your assessment."

Mood slightly dampened, Lightpaw nodded. If she wasn't perfect yet, she would work her hardest towards it.

Flamestrike moved up ahead to walk with Duskwhisker and Shadowpelt. The she-cat found herself walking alongside Rowanstorm and she felt her fur prick at the honour.

"You're the first apprentice in a long time to use such calculation when you fight," he said. Lightpaw looked up at the dark tabby, but found him looking straight ahead. His eyes were glassy and he looked lost in thought.

"I was still a very young warrior the first time I saw someone fight like that," the dark tabby continued. "I must admit I was jealous. I wished I could fight like that. It was impressive, that one so young knew to rely on careful, quick planning rather than strength and speed alone."

Lightpaw purred her agreement. "I'd like to see someone fight like that one day."

Rowanstorm turned his green eyes to her. "You and your father are very much alike. Perhaps one day, you will."

The tortoiseshell she-cat felt her jaw drop slightly. They arrived at camp much too quickly, leaving her no chance to ask all of the questions gathered at the tip of her tongue. She had never seen Spiderthorn fight, so she had no idea what his fighting style entailed. The moment she spotted him slinking towards the Speaking Rock, she wanted to bound over and demand he show her his combat skills.

She held herself back, noticing Dawnstar's agitated posture. The she-cat looked more unsettled than usual and the blaze of her amber eyes sent a chill through Lightpaw. Quietly, she took a place in the circle of DarkClan cats waiting in the camp clearing.

"What are we waiting for?" Rainpaw asked as she settled beside her, Stormpaw on her other side.

Lightpaw shook her head. She didn't know, but from the tension in the air she knew it couldn't be anything enjoyable.

"DarkClan," Dawnstar began, directing their attention to her. "Since the rebellion we have changed our customs to better strengthen us as a Clan. Our pairings span many season cycles, to ensure multiple litters of strong kits. Our kits are not taken care of by our weakest but by our strong queens. Once apprentices, they are trained in higher skills to enable us to grow.

"While all of these changes have proven beneficial, there is one that I believe has left us weaker. We train, and we patrol our territory, and we sometimes chase intruders off – but do we ever really fight? The kind that leaves the taste of blood in your mouth and matted fur between your claws? Why have we become so placid? Why do we not use our skills when we can?

"Today, we will once again prove the strength of DarkClan. Bring the prisoner in!"

Every head turned in the direction of the camp entrance, through which Newtfang and Smoketalon entered with a small dappled she-

cat in tow. The pale tortoiseshell had a long scratch along her back and another on the side of her head; her paws looked raw from where she had wrenched a claw, undoubtedly from digging into the dirt as they dragged her.

Lightpaw's breath caught as the two toms threw the she-cat into the centre of the ring. She twisted and turned, eyes wide as she surveyed the twenty cats surrounding her.

"She was caught on our territory, near the Twolegplace where the rebels disappeared," Dawnstar continued. "She claims not to know of their whereabouts. Let's see how willing she is to talk after a few more scratches."

"Please, I don't know anything!" the prisoner shrieked, but her cry only grew into a wail as Dawnstar slashed her claws over her face. Even from where Lightpaw sat, she could see big red drops hitting the ground.

"We know you Twolegplace cats have a network," Dawnstar hissed. "You pass on information from one cat to the next."

"Please – "

Rowanstorm's blow hit her on the flank and her back legs collapsed with the blow. Smoketalon stepped up next, jaw twisted in a cruel smirk, and landed his own strike on her opposite flank.

"If there was any information it didn't make it to me!" The pale she-cat struggled to her paws, only to fall again as Shadowpelt's claws connected with her chest. Lightpaw wanted to look away from the terrible scene but something kept her watching. Across the circle, she saw Flamestrike and Spiderthorn, both straight-backed and unflinching.

The she-cat wheezed as she spoke again. "The last I heard, the alley cats were still sheltering Nightchaser and his group."

Lightpaw's eyes fell on the prisoner, her chest filled with even more dread than before.

"How dare you speak his name here!" Dawnstar shrieked. The

tortoiseshell prisoner shuddered, backing away from the DarkClan leader's fury. Her back met with Newtfang and Shademask, who promptly shoved her forward again.

"I'm sorry, please, I don't know anything more!"

The she-cat's shrieks were lost as Dawnstar stepped onto her throat, cutting off her air. "Any cat who does not contribute to this prisoner's death will be considered a traitor." When she let the tortoiseshell go, the ring swarmed around her.

Beside Lightpaw, Rainpaw took a tentative step forward. Lightpaw remained where she was, eyes wider than ever as they took in the scene before her.

"Lightpaw?" the grey she-cat whispered. The tortoiseshell watched Beetlepaw slice at the prisoner's tail, then Flamestrike's blow to her side. Spiderthorn stood off to the side, waiting for openings which would allow him to strike at the prisoner. Even Reedpaw had joined the fray.

"Come," an older voice said. Lightpaw glanced up to see Thistleshade watching her with a wary expression.

When the she-cat did not move, the dark warrior moved closer. "You don't have a choice. Come, or be killed."

And Lightpaw went.

// I have good news and bad news.

The bad news is I will be away all of next week supervising a summer camp – and I will not have wifi. Which means no update Wednesday or Sunday. Updates will resume as per usual starting August 10th!

The good news is I've hit my 20k word goal for July's Camp NaNo! YAY!!!

Have a nice week, everyone! Get some sunshine while the weather's nice :)

// chapter 9 //

Snap.

Long canines nearly found their way into his shoulders. Dewkit jumped, fur against the fence at his back, rolling himself into as small a ball as he could. The creature before him brought its square muzzle closer, its large black nose twitching and drool falling in strings from its jaws.

The wet of the creature's nose touched the kit and he uncurled himself, lashing out with thorn-sharp claws. His strike left three red gashes, along with a renewed bloodlust in its beady black eyes.

"Help!" Dewkit squeaked again, racing away from the creature as quickly as he could. It missed him by a hair, crashing its tan and black body into the fence before wheeling around and following him. Its legs were much longer than Dewkit's own and there was nowhere to hide in the Twoleg garden.

Dewkit launched himself at the fence, scrabbling at it with his front paws. His crumpled back leg helped to break his fall as he came tumbling back down.

The creature was closing in. He had two options: stand and fight or let it eat him alive.

The grey tom curled himself up again, waiting for the fangs to pierce his skin. It was useless, he would die either way.

Then, he heard a fierce yowl and a strangled yelp. A chorus of hissing and growling commenced, followed by the sounds of claws ripping through fur. Dewkit shivered, not daring to look up. The ground shuddered beneath him as something heavy fell to it.

Next thing he knew, he was being lifted up. Dewkit cried out, struggling with all his might, but whoever held his scruff tightly in their jaws ignored him, taking a mighty leap and landing on the

fencetop above instead.

"Stop struggling, beetlebrain," the muffled voice commanded, placing him on top of the wooden slats. "I just saved your life, is that any way to thank your rescuer?"

Dewkit blinked up at the figure before him. He was long and lithe, enough to see his ribs poking through his fur in the light of the moon, but also enough to define the slight muscles of his legs and chest in shadow. His brown tabby fur was clean, if a little messy, and his tail and ears ended in tufts.

The kit's hazel eyes met bright amber ones. "Thank you," Dewkit breathed, glancing down into the Twoleg garden. The creature was nowhere to be seen.

"That dog nearly got you," the tom replied. "Why are you on your own in such a dangerous place, small one? Especially with that limp of yours?"

Dewkit felt panic and embarrassment fill him at the tom's observations. "I got separated," the kit stammered, pushing back his ears and shuffling his paws. "No one came looking for me."

Saying the words out loud only made him feel worse. He suddenly felt an urgent need to wail.

"Think we can follow their scent?" the tom suggested, twitching his nose upwards at the stars.

"No need," came a growl from behind Dewkit. Warmth filled him as a grey tail wrapped around him, holding him close.

The brown tabby tom got to his paws, nodding his head courteously. "I will be on my way then."

"Not so fast." Dewkit became aware of other cats standing in the shadows, some on top of fences and others below in the Twoleg gardens. He realized they were surrounding his rescuer.

"You're not from these parts," Bronco said as he stepped forward. He was larger than the other tom and regarded him coldly.

"How do we know we can trust you?" Nightchaser asked as he approached the brown tabby from the other direction, neatly putting one paw in front of the other.

Dewkit's rescuer nodded to both of the cats approaching him before sitting back down on the fence. He looked entirely unworried by the situation.

"I've travelled for many days, it's true," he said, raising his voice so everyone gathered could hear him. "Yet, despite my exhaustion, I still saved your kit who you left behind. That dog would have eaten him alive had it not been for me."

Cinderblossom gave a soft gasp and pulled Dewkit closer.

"And how do we know your act of bravery is not meant to infiltrate our ranks?" Sprucetail stepped into the light below the fence, green eyes blazing.

The brown tabby tom flicked his tail. "My, you are a paranoid bunch, aren't you? What's got your tail in knots, sweetheart?"

Sprucetail bared her fangs and Dewkit saw her claws glint in the moonlight as she unsheathed them.

"Let him stay for the night," advised Roxanne, padding up on the fence perpendicular to the scene. "Lets us keep an eye on him and gives him somewhere to rest after his 'long journey'." Her eyes were narrowed as she spoke, showing her own distrust.

The tom dipped his head. "Thank you, single logical member of the group. I will gladly spend the night with you." Roxanne's fur rose and she bared her own fangs, but kept her distance.

Bronco flicked his tail in agreement and the other alley cats shuffled their paws, reassembling now that a decision had been made. From his vantage point atop the fence, Dewkit could see Jaystrike, Condor, and Olive joining Sprucetail; Crowpaw and a slightly worse for wear Webpaw padded up soon after.

"Bramblefire, Beaver, Sprucetail, Leo," Bronco called. "Keep an eye on him."

"The name's Killian," the tabby tom pointed out, bowing deeply to the leader of the alley cats.

"Whatever you say, *sweetheart*," Sprucetail growled, voice dripping poison as she took her place behind him.

Killian twitched his whiskers at Dewkit once before Cinderblossom whisked the kit away, never once taking her eyes of off her charge as they continued on their way.

Tumble-Down Den was not what Dewkit expected. The name fit well enough, but his first glimpse of the camp made him wish for the safety of his cardboard den once more.

The landmark after which the camp was named consisted of a Twoleg den so old it had started to collapse in on itself. The canopy was a dappled red and black and completely missing in some places; the entire right side sagged against beams that stood out like ribs. The back wall of the den had disappeared, the only evidence of its existence the crumbling rock pillars and rotting wood that stood there.

Within, short white fences separated the space into three main areas – one large and two small. It was decided by Bronco and Nightchaser that there would be no assigned sleeping areas. Dewkit followed Cinderblossom into a sturdy corner of the den, two rock walls on either side and the sloping canopy above. Outside, small raindrops had begun to fall.

The rest of the group split off. Webpaw found a place on the other side of the den from them, casting wary glances at the queen and her kit. Crowpaw, Bramblefire, and Jaystrike followed her while Sprucetail and Birchfrost settled down together near the back opening. Lily and Mothpelt set their herbs down in the driest corner of the den before splitting off too – Mothpelt in Cinderblossom's direction and Lily to Mira, Quartz, and Indigo. The alley cat trainees created their own nest, a pile of bodies indiscernible from the other. Leo, Fiero, and Beaver kept to the centre of the area, while Roxanne, Condor, and Bronco found a place opposite the tumbled wall.

That left Nightchaser – who had seemingly disappeared – and Killian. The brown tabby tom remained by the opening, gazing out at the overgrown garden beyond. From where Dewkit sat, it almost looked like a forest, with branches twisting like tails into each other and small shrubs and saplings taking cover beneath them. His paws itched to explore, but after the incident with the dog he knew Cinderblossom would never let him out of her sight again.

He sighed, blinking his eyelids closed. Perhaps if he fell asleep he would dream of the forest, where he could run without a care. The sounds and scents would be just as fresh as in reality and he would be whole, no limp leg holding him back. His whiskers twitched in happiness as he began to drift off.

Through his sleepy haze he heard footsteps approach gently but his eyelids had become too heavy. Instead, he felt Cinderblossom's body curl more tightly around him, the whisper of a hiss escaping her.

"Do you mind?" Killian's voice was soft but not pleading, simply asking permission.

Cinderblossom's response did not come immediately. "We could use the warmth," she finally decided, some of the tension leaving her body.

The last thing Dewkit remembered before sleep took him was the soft beating of her heart.

//

Life at Tumble-Down Den seemed simpler. Training sessions took place within the overgrown garden and Dewkit, though he was not allowed to join them, watched carefully. Finch was an expert at weaving through the branches and shrubs; Olive's careful paws created not a whisper as she prowled through the undergrowth.

Glancing at his limp back leg, Dewkit couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy. Even Crowpaw, perpetually behind in training, could pass the drills Quartz set out for them here.

The providers were gone from dawn to dusk, coming back with more freshkill than before even though leafbare drew closer and closer. Nightchaser, too, would disappear for long lengths of time and only a select few seemed privy to where he spent his time.

The only constant became Killian, who lazed around the camp and, much like Dewkit, watched the trainees go about their day before settling down with a piece of freshkill and observing the rest of the Clan. Though he was an outsider, Dewkit felt a certain camaraderie with the tom and often shifted closer to him.

"Shouldn't you be out there?" the brown tabby asked one day as they watched Soren and Hazel race through the garden. Seven sunrises had passed since their arrival at the new camp and still the tom remained with them. He did not cause trouble and helped where and when the others let him; all in all, he wasn't so bad.

Dewkit shrugged. "I'm too young to start training still." *And too broken.*

"You must be nearly six moons," Killian replied. "That's old enough, if you ask me."

The grey kit held his tongue, watching as Crisp crowed her victory over Oats.

"Soft kits never survive." The voice startled both of them and Dewkit turned to see Nightchaser in the shadows of the den. He blinked once, twice, reassuring himself that the tom was really there; he spent so little time in camp, Dewkit might have believed it was a ghost.

"I was a soft kit," Killian drawled, turning back to the trainees. Robin was now up against Crowpaw.

Golden orbs narrowed. "In this world, only those born to fight survive. In DarkClan, he would have been killed immediately."

Dewkit curled in on himself as Nightchaser stalked past, settling near Quartz to watch the trainees' progress. The many thoughts rushing through the kit's head jumbled together and he felt a

sudden need to prove himself. Before anyone could stop him, he rose to his paws and stumbled towards the training session.

A large figure cut him off, dropping down from the nearby fence. Dewkit nearly shot out of his fur, leaping back just as another figure dropped to the ground. The first, a rather fat brown tabby, turned a friendly face towards him while the other, a wise-looking grey she-cat, observed the camp calmly.

"Sorry to interrupt, but we have news," the tom said.

Roxanne stepped forward first. "Charlie, Minerva, what a pleasure to see you. What brings you to the other side of Twolegplace?"

Minerva, the grey she-cat, looked grim as she spoke. "Bad news. Bree was captured and killed. They wanted information on their whereabouts."

A hushed silence filled the camp. Sprucetail began pacing, a shocked Jaystrike in the background. Bramblefire took on a defensive stance, Birchfrost a fearful one. Dewkit felt Cinderblossom draw closer to him.

"Did she give them anything?" Nightchaser asked quietly.

"No," Minerva replied. "No news reached her before they took her."

The tom's white-rimmed eyes closed and the fur of his back lay flat. "Good."

A new shift occurred and, this time, Dewkit saw Roxanne's fur rise. Olive and Quartz looked affronted, while Beaver lashed his tail.

"Good?" Charlie asked, his own stance predatory. "Bree was a good friend to all of us. And you're saying that her death at the claws of *your* Clan, for *your* sake is 'good'?"

"They don't know where we are," Nightchaser replied calmly, though his own claws slipped out of their sheathes. "They have no way of finding us."

"That's not going to bring Bree back," Charlie hissed, crouching low.

"Stop this." Bronco's commanding voice filled the temporary camp as he leaped down from the fence. The mice in his jaws hit the ground with a resounding thud. "There will be no fighting amongst us when there are common enemies elsewhere." His amber gaze surveyed those around him.

"He's right," Sprucetail said quietly, placing a gentle tail on Nightchaser's shoulders.

"If he's right then why do his alley cats keep placing blame on us?" the black tom hissed. Before Dewkit could blink, Nightchaser had disappeared again.

Bronco remained where he stood, gazing after him. "Cinderblossom, Jaystrike, Condor – see that he doesn't cause any damage to himself." Without a word, the cats named moved off, Cinderblossom casting one last look over her shoulder at Dewkit before following her littermate over the fences.

"Paranoia everywhere," Killian muttered under his breath, rising to his paws. Then, in a louder voice, "I have to say, I'm intrigued. Who exactly is this enemy? Perhaps I can do something to help?"

Bronco's words were lost as Sprucetail approached the confident tabby. "And how do we know we can trust you? How do we know you don't already know who 'they' are?"

Killian flicked his tail dismissively. "I'm asking aren't I? If I knew who they were why would I ask?"

The she-cat's eyes narrowed. "Maybe you're bluffing."

"And maybe you're just too blind to see what's in front of you."

Sprucetail's jaws drew back to reveal blindingly white teeth. Killian crouched lower over his striped paws and the two began to circle. Dewkit stood back, holding his breath as he watched the two older cats size each other up.

"Tell you what," Sprucetail finally said. "If you can beat me in battle, we'll let you stay to help our cause. We do need good fighters, after all."

"Claws sheathed, I hope?" Killian asked sweetly.

"In your dreams," Sprucetail replied. She launched herself at the tom so quickly he hardly had time to shield himself. Claws cut through fur and skin but he did not let out a sound.

"You fight dirty," he growled. "Good thing I grew up in the streets."

The tabby pounced, just catching Sprucetail by the shoulder as he sailed by, claws leaving a score in her side. He turned so quickly Dewkit felt himself grow dizzy and met Sprucetail's next blow with a parry, bringing up a paw to her head in the process. The she-cat ducked, barrelling into his chest with her weight.

Killian fell back, tripping over his paws with the force of the blow. He struck out blindly, catching Sprucetail on the ear once before her pummelling paws hit his chest and stomach. A screech filled the air and Dewkit drew back his ears at the pained sound.

The cry cut itself off abruptly and the tabby rolled, Sprucetail's paws now hitting his back. With a great huff, he pushed off of the ground, sending her backwards, and brought his own body crashing down onto her. She yowled in protest, trying to push him off.

"Not so cocky now!" Killian's voice reverberated around the garden. He whipped around, paws working in a steady rhythm – right, left, right left – hitting various parts of the she-cat's body. Her shoulders were soon marked up, her stomach, her legs.

Finally, she blocked one of his attacks and, breaking his rhythm, rolled him over. He, in turn, used his weight to throw her to the side and pin her down.

Dewkit watched as the two tumbled over and over in endless circles, each trying to one-up the other. Every time it seemed One or the other had won, they would continue their battle, taunts flying across the small camp space.

"Enough!" Bronco called, breaking the two apart. He held Sprucetail back while Roxanne rushed forward to hold back Killian. The two combatants were breathing hard enough for Dewkit to hear the air

rushing in and out of their lungs.

"Good enough to stay?" Killian managed to get out.

Bronco's face remained impassive. "Your stalemate with Sprucetail is no win, but I think we'll find a use for you."

Sprucetail opened her mouth to argue, but one angry look from Bronco made her hold her tongue.

"Now get cleaned up," he hissed. "Leafbare will soon be upon us and I don't want to be wasting herbs on something like this again."

// I'm back, and with a longer chapter to make up for my absence! Camp was great, got a nice tan and only had to scream a little bit to get the kids to listen to me. Didn't have to resort to Dawnstar level discipline so, all in all, not a bad experience.

// chapter 10 //

The eerie silence of the forest surrounded Lightpaw as she slid forward, pushing past low-hanging pine branches and scratchy bramble bushes. The quiet pressed down on her from all sides, too heavy and much too encompassing. Every step she took seemed to send up a flurry of sound and made her fur stand on end.

How am I ever to be as silent as the forest? Not a bird chirped, not a mouse squeaked; even the wind was silent today.

She noticed the small twig seconds before placing her paw on it. Smugly, she reached a little further forward, narrowly avoiding discovery. Her weight shifted forward, then backwards again as she pulled her rear legs forward. One more step and –

Crack!

Lightpaw's right back leg hit the twig she had only just avoided.

Her cry of frustration turned into a yowl of surprise as a body hit her, flinging her into a bed of dead leaves. Brown and orange covered her vision, rising up in clouds above her and floating back down to rest on top of the ginger tom standing over her.

"Again." Flamestrike's amber eyes were narrowed with disapproval and Lightpaw felt her insides shrink.

"I don't understand what I'm doing wrong," she growled as he let her up, shaking out the foliage stuck in his fur.

"You're too conscious of your steps," he replied, running a paw over his ears.

"But if I'm not conscious I make too much noise!" she protested.

He cuffed her over the ears. "Then learn to walk the forest as if you are a part of it! Over-thinking it makes it unnatural and in order to be completely silent it needs to feel the opposite."

"Slinking through the forest like a rogue in my own territory is supposed to feel natural?" Lightpaw replied.

Flamestrike snorted. "It's a skill you need to learn. Rainpaw can do it, no one's found her yet. Beetlepaw and Stormpaw are doing well, they've only been caught twice. Even Yewpaw's doing better than you are!"

The tortoiseshell apprentice felt her fur burn. With a huff, she rushed back into the undergrowth, concentrating intensely. She wouldn't be beat. She was great at fighting and hunting, why was stealth such a problem?

But are you really that great?

Lightpaw shook her head, clearing the voice of doubt away. She took a deep breath, driving out the images that accompanied it: a small figure, standing on the edge while everyone else threw themselves inwards, claws and fangs flashing; a dappled pelt so saturated with red it hardly looked real; the dull hazel gaze of an innocent.

She stopped herself from grinding her fangs together, afraid of being caught once more. Six times already today, and their stealth drill was nowhere from being over. Rowanstorm would make them practice until dusk, if that's what it took.

The next cat to catch her was Oakshade after she had the misfortune of getting stuck in a bramble bush. The tabby looked apologetic and even stopped to pull some of the burrs out of her fur, but it was a seventh catch nonetheless. More determined than ever, Lightpaw pushed forward.

The one advantage she had over the others was her dappled pelt. The creams and blues and patches of white hid her well in the leaf-bare scenery; at least, much better than Beetlepaw's pitch black pelt or the greys and golds of Rainpaw, Stormpaw, and Yewpaw.

The one disadvantage were her apparently very clumsy paws and her habit of grinding her fangs in frustration.

"I can hear you, you know."

The tortoiseshell nearly jumped out of her fur as she came face to face with Shademask.

"Next time you sneak up on me like that, I'll claw your ears off," Lightpaw hissed, smoothing out her fur.

Shademask scowled. "Is that any way to talk to your elder?" His eyes, the dark green of pine needles, flashed dangerously.

The apprentice ducked her head. "No."

He nodded his approval, though the disapproving look did not waver. "The point of this exercise is for you to learn how to do exactly what I just did."

"And I'm the one who's supposed to be sneaking up on you, not the other way around," Lightpaw pointed out angrily.

"Doesn't change the fact that you neither saw, heard, or smelled me coming," the tom replied. "Now, tell me, how many times have you been caught? Five?"

The tortoiseshell's eyes widened. The lie would slip out so easily, even though the truth was right there on the tip of her tongue.

"Eight," she finally said, pushing her ears back in embarrassment.

Shademask did not react to the information, just nodded his head. "I will let Rowanstorm know." Lightpaw already dreaded the older tom's lecture once the drill came to an end.

Sure enough, at dusk when the drill finally came to an end, Rowanstorm singled her out first. Since getting caught by Shademask, Lightpaw had been caught four more times. She wanted to blame it on the thorn stuck in her paw but knew the excuse would never pass in front of the old mentor.

"Twelve times!" Rowanstorm's narrowed eyes beckoned her forward and Lightpaw stepped hesitantly towards the line of mentors, leaving the other apprentices behind. She heard Beetlepaw's snicker

all too well.

"Caught twice by Newtfang, Oakshade, and Thistleshade, once by Shademask, Dapplefrost, and myself, and three times by Flamestrike." Rowanstorm flicked his tail as he listed off the names. Lightpaw only bowed her head lower in defeat, unwilling to meet the older tom's eyes.

"Three times by the same cat!" the tabby bellowed. "How are you ever supposed to pass your warrior assessment if you can't even sneak past one cat?"

The tortoiseshell felt a shiver run up her spine, but she remained motionless and kept her face blank.

Rowanstorm snorted derisively and Lightpaw, taking it as dismissal, retreated to the line of apprentices. Yewpaw flicked his tail over her lower back in a show of companionship, but Lightpaw knew he was secretly glad he had finally beat her in something.

"Yewpaw, you were caught nine times," Rowanstorm continued. "Not good enough. Stormpaw, six times, getting better. Beetlepaw, five times, that's decent. Rainpaw only twice, very good."

"No perfect scores," Newtfang said. "Hopefully by your warrior assessments only once or twice will be the maximum."

Rainpaw, affronted by the ginger tabby's words, stepped forward. "What's a perfect score?"

She shrank back again as Rowanstorm's green eyes settled on her. "Zero. That's the only way your enemies don't catch and kill you."

Then, directing his barb at Lightpaw, "You would be dead twelve times over if the rebels ever caught you."

//

Lightpaw chose not to eat with the other apprentices that night. Beetlepaw was annoying at the best of times; after beating the others, even though she had still come in second place, she was downright insufferable.

Instead, the tortoiseshell dragged her small mouse to the abandoned log, pushing herself right against it to shelter from the cold wind that had picked up as the sun sank lower. The mouse was tiny, with hardly any meat on its bones, but she didn't feel like she deserved much more. The thorn still stuck in her paw reminded her of that.

"Mind if I join you?" Lightpaw glanced up in surprise at Thistleshade. Though she did not feel like having company, the apprentice just nodded and continued to eat in silence.

Thistleshade tore into her sparrow quietly and the two sat side by side, crunching the bones between their fangs.

"That was a tough drill today," the black she-cat commented off-handedly, still chewing.

Lightpaw snorted. "I don't want to talk about it."

"There were seven of us and only five of you," she continued. "Not getting caught was a real feat."

"Yes, well, Rainpaw managed to do quite nicely, didn't she?" Lightpaw bit back.

Thistleshade purred. "She's the daughter of two of the stealthiest cats in this Clan."

Belatedly, Lightpaw remembered the conversation she overheard between Thistleshade and Oakshade in the forest and realized Rainpaw was their kit.

"I'm sorry," the apprentice replied. "I just don't want to fail my warrior assessment."

The older she-cat looked at her with a bright light in her eyes. Lightpaw didn't quite know what to call it.

"You won't," she said. "You just need some more practice is all."

Lightpaw's previous frustration returned. "Why do we need to be so silent anyways? If we're good at fighting what does it matter?"

This time, Thistleshade frowned. "A well-rounded warrior is the best kind of warrior. There are things you will always be better or worse at but you should know how to do everything to an acceptable degree. Stealth and climbing included."

The bubbling anger continued to simmer deep within Lightpaw's belly. *It's not fair.*

"Let me tell you a story," Thistleshade continued. "My littermates and I are all very different. Ternpaw was killed as an apprentice, but Duskwhisker you know well. He is a hunter and great at climbing, but his fighting and stealth could use some work. I, on the other hand, am one of the stealthiest hunters in the Clan, but fighting does not come easily to me."

"But it does come easily to me," Lightpaw interjected. "So what is the point of this story?"

Thistleshade hesitated. "Well... We also have a sister. She was always the best fighter out of the four of us and incredibly strong too. That gave her the ability to climb. On top of that her resourcefulness came in handy when strategizing; I can't remember a single time I beat her in battle training."

The apprentice blinked. "And her stealth?"

The black she-cat shook her head. "Not very good, I'm afraid. But she worked on it. We never had drills like yours when I was an apprentice but she would purposely slink through the forest when hunting, just to practice."

"And you think I should do the same?"

"It's just a suggestion. There's only one way to get better though, right?"

Lightpaw felt her fangs clench. She didn't want to say it out loud just yet.

"What happened to your sister?" she asked instead.

The tension that filled the air between them was so sudden

Lightpaw couldn't help but unsheathe her claws. The older she-cat looked stricken, as if she were fighting an inner battle.

"Remember what Rowanstorm said about you being killed twelve times over if the rebels caught you?" Thistleshade whispered.

The apprentice nodded. "How could I forget?"

"You wouldn't be," the she-cat replied.

Lightpaw's fur lay flat again and she cocked her head in confusion. "How do you know that? And what has that got to do with your sister?"

But the black warrior was already walking away, summoned by Spiderthorn's call for midnight border patrol. The tortoiseshell watched her receding figure, irritated once more. She got to her paws, burning for answers; instead, she let out a yelp of pain as her throbbing paw reminded her of the thorn still stuck there.

At least Reedpaw can't bother me about the drill, Lightpaw thought bitterly before limping off to the healer's den.

// Looks like Lightpaw's a little bit frustrated. Perhaps she can pull an Acornfire and get better overnight?

// chapter 11 //

When the snow came it did not stop. Flake after flake, storm after storm; to little Dewkit, it seemed endless. Dark masses roiled the sky while the earth below became utterly pale. Even the guards, sitting steadfastly by their posts around Tumble-Down Den became alabaster statues.

Tucked into his warm nest, Dewkit could only think about how cold Hazel and Soren had to be.

Since their arrival at the new camp, things had not changed for the better. Even a quarter moon later a thin layer of tension filled the air, so fragile the slightest misstep would tear it apart. Dewkit did his best to stay away from the irritable mentors and the equally annoyed trainees, but fear of boredom quickly got him into trouble. Already Quartz had snapped at him, and Cinderblossom berated him for getting underpaw. Even Mothpelt and Beaver, who generally welcomed the kit's presence, seemed on edge.

Today he would stay in his nest. Today he would pretend he did not exist so Condor's sharp growl would not suddenly stop him in his tracks, or Sprucetail's command would not have him skidding to a halt.

He hated being a kit. He hated being the only kit.

The trainees did not have it much better, though. With leafbare here, Bronco declared a decrease in training in order to save on freshkill. Training drained the trainees and left them tired and hungry, something the alley cats could not afford. Already, the meagre freshkill pile had disappeared – and it was only sunhigh.

Dewkit felt his stomach rumble and curled himself up tighter. The first time he saw snow he was enchanted; now, with the threat of hunger hanging over him, he didn't feel quite the same.

"Staying out of trouble?"

The kit turned his eyes from the falling snow to the dark tabby sitting in the corner of the den.

"I got tired," he explained before turning back to the storm.

"And hungry, I assume," Killian observed.

Dewkit's stomach rumbled again. Cinderblossom had gone out at dawn to see if she could catch anything, leaving her kit under the strict watch of Killian. She seemed to trust him, though many of the others did not. Besides that, he was often the only cat in camp without an assigned task.

"Cinderblossom's out there somewhere," he replied. He hoped she would be back soon.

Killian shuffled closer. "Indigo is too. And Bramblefire and Mira and Leo. Condor too, if I'm not mistaken. And Nightchaser, of course."

Dewkit nodded. No one had seen Nightchaser for days.

"Want a bite?" The dark tabby dropped something before the nest and the hot smell of blood hit Dewkit unexpectedly. He tore into the small mouse ravenously, only stopping when he realized there was nothing left.

"I'm sorry," he mewed, looking at the bare bones. Small scraps hung here and there, but not enough to feed a full-grown cat.

"When was the last time you ate?" Killian asked, snapping up one of the bones. It crunched loudly between his fangs.

Dewkit paused. "Two dusks ago?" There had only been enough prey the day before to feed the trainees, who had gone without the day prior. Two small mice, a shrew, and a small bird.

"We need better hunters out there," Killian commented, another bone disappearing.

"They are out there," Dewkit said quietly. The dark storm clouds above hung ominously and the tom felt as if an incredible weight were pushing down on them all.

"I'm not out there." The dark tabby twitched his whiskers.

"No, you're here watching me," the kit replied.

"You're not doing anything," the tabby pointed out.

Dewkit shrugged. "You're free to go, as far as I'm concerned."

The crunch of bones filled the silence between them until that, too, dissolved into nothingness. Dewkit strained his crumpled ears, hoping for any sound at all, but the only thing that came to him was the howling wind. Not a soul stirred as the flakes continued to drift down, ghost-like and translucent.

"You seem older than you really are."

The grey tom gave the tabby a sidelong glance. "How so?"

"Well, for one, I've never seen a kit sit this still."

"I'm crippled, remember?" Dewkit didn't hold back the bite in his voice, making sure Killian heard it loud and clear.

"I've also never seen a crippled kit move so quickly," the tabby responded. "You were doing quite well outrunning that dog."

Dewkit flicked his short tail. "Have you ever even seen a crippled kit?"

Killian hesitated. "Yes. But he was killed many seasons ago."

The kit nodded, leaving it at that.

Yet, the longer the two of them sat watching the snow blow outside the more curiosity Dewkit felt. He knew almost nothing about Killian, though the tabby did not come across as secretive.

"What was the name of this crippled kit?" he asked finally.

Killian twitched his whiskers, as if he'd known all along that Dewkit would ask. "Jed."

"What kind of name is Jed?" the grey tom asked, screwing up his

nose as a cold gust of wind entered their shelter.

The tabby moved closer so that their fur brushed. "Jed is the kind of name a mother gives to the littermate of a Killian, I suppose."

Dewkit felt a pang of guilt. "He was your brother?"

"Yes. He was born a few moments before me, actually, but I ended up taking on the role of the eldest when I discovered he had a stunted back leg." He flicked his tail pointedly at Dewkit's own.

"What do you mean, 'discovered'? It's kind of hard to miss." Dewkit lay his head down on his front paws, though his ears remained angled in Killian's direction.

"As a kit, I didn't realize he was different," the tom continued. "I knew he was slower, a little more awkward, and less skilled at running and climbing and jumping than the rest of us. But that didn't stop him from playing moss ball with me, or racing me around our little den. In greenleaf, if we could find grass tough enough, I would get him to wrap it around my back legs, tight, so our races would be more fair."

"What happened when you grew older?"

Killian's tone changed, a note of sadness hidden deep within it. "The rest of the world did not see a need to be fair. To it, Jed was just a sorry excuse for a cat, a waste of space. Why spend resources and energy on someone who will never contribute like everyone else?"

Dewkit pushed back his ears. "I don't like this story."

"Neither do I," the dark tabby sighed. "To me, Jed was the perfect brother. He may have had a crippled back leg, but so what? He was incredibly smart – he figured out how to catch fish that greenleaf! He found a way to scale the tree nearest our den in case a fox ever attacked, he must have practiced that for moons. He learned to use his stunted leg as a fighting technique, swinging it club-like through the air at his opponents.

"Just because the rest of the world didn't see him as whole doesn't mean he wasn't."

The kit turned his hazel eyes to Killian. "What happened to him?"

"They took him away." The tabby's voice was choked, the wind almost drowning it out.

"Who did?"

"The Marked."

"They killed him?"

"Yes."

Dewkit glanced down at his leg. It lay limp beside him at an odd angle to his body. The idea that he might still be able to climb, and fight, and hunt despite his disability gave him some hope. The outcome of Jed's story snuffed it all out.

His eyes wandered back to the falling snow. The perfect blanket of white had been disturbed by the pawprints of those returning from their hunts. None seemed too pleased with their catches.

"The Marked – who are they?" Dewkit asked, watching Indigo place a thrush in the small hole dug out for the freshkill pile.

"We loners and rogues call them the Marked for the scars on their shoulders," Killian replied. "It's their most identifiable feature and the first warning sign of danger when they approach."

"So I should stay away from them," the kit said, shifting closer to the tabby as another cold gust of wind blew past.

"You can try," the rogue said. "But with this lot you might have a tough time doing it."

"Are the Marked nearby?" Dewkit pressed, yearning for more.

"Closer than you think," Killian responded grimly. His expression brightened as Cinderblossom approached, a shrew in her jaws.

"Managed to snag this." The freshkill dropped to the ground with a thud. "It's not much, but I haven't been out hunting for nearly six

moons now. I'm just glad I could get one."

"It's a good catch," the tom acknowledged.

"Dewkit, you must be hungry," Cinderblossom pressed, pushing the shrew closer.

The remnants of his earlier hunger rumbled in Dewkit's belly. The shrew looked scrumptious but the guilt would weigh too heavily in his stomach later.

"I, uh, already ate," he said sheepishly, glancing at Killian. "He caught a mouse and we shared it."

Cinderblossom's face took on a slightly crestfallen look. "Oh, well, I'm sure there will be more freshkill for us to share some other day." She picked the rodent back up and began to pad in the direction of the freshkill pile.

"What about yourself?" Killian called after her. The she-cat stopped. "We'll take a bite, if you don't want to eat it alone."

The grey queen shook her head. "I'm fine. If I need company I'll go share it with Mothpelt." She padded off quickly, as if afraid the tabby would change her mind.

The guilt descended on Dewkit regardless of his stomach, which growled angrily at him for refusing the freshkill. One look at the freshkill pile told him others would be going to their nests even more hungry tonight.

The bushes at the end of the garden rustled as more of the hunters arrived. Leo held a mouse in his jaws, while Bramblefire had managed to hunt down a one-winged magpie. Roxanne placed a frog on the pile and Dewkit shivered at the thought of its sliminess on his tongue. Then again, if he were hungry enough – like Beaver, who snatched it up moments later – he might consider eating it too.

It looked like another bleak day, hunger-wise. Dewkit shivered with the realization that this was only the beginning of a hard leafbare.

The bushes rustled again, revealing Nightchaser as he stepped

through. A sudden hush came over the camp and everyone watched with lust-filled eyes as the black tom dragged a rabbit over to the freshkill pile. It dwarfed every other piece in size, big enough to feed all of the trainees for the night.

Then, done with his task, Nightchaser approached Dewkit and Killian. Unsure what to do, the kit rose to his paws; Killian remained still.

"Dewkit, I believe it's time," the black tom said. There was something like disdain in his voice, but the grey kit did not know what it meant.

"Time for what?" he squeaked, avoiding his white-rimmed eyes.

Nightchaser's features softened from their perpetual hardness for just a moment. "You're six moons old now, aren't you?"

"Six moons – " It hit him when he glanced over at Webpaw and Crowpaw, who were eagerly eyeing the rabbit Nightchaser dragged in.

He followed the tom proudly out into the garden, settling down in a large patch of snow while Nightchaser leaped up onto a low-hanging branch. Bronco, noticing the commotion, gave a flick of his tail and followed suit. Slowly, the rest of the alley cats gathered.

"Today we come together to see a kit become a trainee," Bronco announced, looking right at Dewkit. The grey kit puffed out his chest, only to curl into himself as Cinderblossom came rushing forward, peppering his head and shoulders with licks.

"Cinderblossom, stop!" he whined. A couple of the surrounding cats sniggered.

"You're my only kit," she replied with one last lick. "And the new healer's apprentice at that!"

Dewkit felt his heart stop. "Healer's apprentice?"

The entire camp seemed to hold its breath as Cinderblossom nodded. "Yes, healer's apprentice. Why wouldn't you want to be

one?"

"I hate herbs," Dewkit replied.

"But you'll be very good at sorting them," the queen assured him.

"I don't want to sort, I want to hunt and fight!" he protested.

"Mothpelt will be a great mentor!" she replied, voice rising.

"But I don't want to be a healer!" Dewkit shouted.

The silence was as thick as the storm around them.

"From now on, you will be known as Dewpaw," Nightchaser cut in, stepping forward. "You will train with the other trainees underneath the direction of your mentors, headed by Quartz. Any special training will occur on your own time, but only if you ask for further mentorship. You will receive your full name when the time comes."

Dewpaw nodded his head, touching his nose eagerly to Nightchaser's, as he had seen Robin, Crisp, and Oats do with Bronco when they became trainees. The black tom drew away quickly.

"Dewpaw!" Beaver was the first to call his new name and, soon, everyone had joined in – even Finch and Soren, who normally went out of their way to be rude to him.

"Congratulations," Cinderblossom said stiffly, giving her kit another swift lick.

"I haven't done anything yet," Dewpaw muttered, shaking the snow out of his fur. His ears burned with embarrassment as he noticed some of the alley cats looking their way, whispering to each other. He avoided Mothpelt's gaze altogether, afraid of the hurt he might find there.

"You've survived so far," Sprucetail pointed out, padding over. "That's something every cat should be proud of."

Unsure of how to take her comment, Dewpaw held his tongue. Then, his eyes fell on the three scars on the black she-cat's shoulder.

His argument and ceremony fell away.

"Indeed, well done," Birchfrost said, joining them. She, too, had three long scars marring her grey and white fur. Dewpaw's eyes widened.

"Training will commence tomorrow!" Bronco's announcement sent up a cheer from the trainees, who had settled down around the rabbit and were eagerly tearing into it.

Dewpaw stuttered as he spoke. "I - I think I'll join my new denmates," he said.

He rushed away from Sprucetail, Birchfrost, and Cinderblossom much too quickly, finding a place between Crowpaw and Crisp around the rabbit. The others made room for him, some more willingly than others, but Dewpaw's thoughts were far away from the other trainees' acceptance of him.

From across the camp, Killian's amber eyes met his before sliding away lazily, as if he had nothing to do with Dewpaw's newfound fear.

// Only 10 minutes late (mountain time...)! I've been so incredibly busy – just got back from my roadtrip on Sunday, had a lot of errands to run and things to do the last couple of days and I just got down to writing again. Hopefully this chapter makes up for it, as will the Lightpaw update on Sunday (hopefully). Thanks for putting up with my absences :)

// chapter 12 //

With her paw fully healed, Lightpaw threw herself into training. The day of her warrior assessment loomed and her fighting skills were beyond ready; hunting was proficient, almost excellent; jumping and climbing skills could use some work, but were passable.

Stealth was a whole other story.

"Got you again!" Rainpaw cried happily as Lightpaw felt her weight on her shoulders. The tortoiseshell flattened herself, catching the grey tabby off-guard. Rainpaw rolled forward into a pile of snow.

"How do you do that?" the pale she-cat hissed, angry with herself for getting caught.

Rainpaw shook the snow off her whiskers. "You're as loud as a badger. The snow doesn't help, of course, I could hear you from treelengths away."

Lightpaw flicked an ear. The snow crunched, the leaves crackled, and the low-hanging branches swished. How on earth was she supposed to be silent?

"I think that's enough for the day," the tortoiseshell decided, getting to her paws. "Flamestrike told me to be back for patrol by sundown." She turned in the direction of High Rocks, Rainpaw trotting after her – very quietly, much to Lightpaw's dismay.

The business of camp masked their arrival and Lightpaw slunk off to the healer's den before anyone noticed her. Rainpaw, of course, joined Stormpaw and the other apprentices by their den. Watching her go, Lightpaw's eyes met Beetlepaw's briefly; the flash of triumph in the black she-cat's eyes caused her to turn away quickly.

"Reedpaw?" Lightpaw called as she stepped into the sweet-smelling den. She drew in a deep breath, enjoying the mixture of scents.

With leaf-bare here, everything else smelled dead.

"Back here!" Reedpaw called from the depths of the den.

"I just need a place to rest for a second," Lightpaw began, padding over. "Training is taking the life – " She stopped abruptly as her eyes fell on Pigeonfang, who lay on her side in one of the healer's nests. Reedpaw's brown paws kneaded her stomach gently and the she-cat would growl deep in her throat every so often.

"Definitely two, perhaps three or four," the tom said. "It's too early to tell for sure, I think." Lightpaw could hear the trembling in his voice, the slightest shred of doubt.

"I hope it's not too painful when the time comes," Pigeonfang replied. "I already feel like I'm about to burst."

Reedpaw shook his head. "I'm afraid it won't be easy. You still have another moon to go, at least."

The grey and white she-cat groaned as she rose to her paws. "Thanks, Reedpaw." She cast the two of them one curious glance before heaving herself out the entrance.

Lightpaw and Reedpaw exchanged a look.

"Are you alright?" Lightpaw asked lightly as the tom turned to his medicine storage.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" he replied. "I am the Clan's healer, after all." He dropped a pile of herbs before her, their sweet scents filling the air between them.

She looked at them with distaste. "I'm not actually sick, you know. I just don't want Flamestrike asking me questions about my training."

Reedpaw tilted his head. "That bad?"

Lightpaw nodded.

The brown tabby twitched his whiskers grimly. "If you do want to take those," he continued, "they will help with the stress and

weariness."

She held his copper gaze, noticing the hopefulness that filled it. With a sigh, she dipped her head down, swallowing the herbs in one gulp. The happy satisfaction on Reedpaw's face was enough to make her forget their tang.

"Thank you," the tortoiseshell said. Reedpaw only nodded his head.

Outside of the healer's den, Spiderthorn's voice carried across the camp as he called out the dusk patrols. Hearing her name, Lightpaw directed her paws to the den entrance. She had nearly reached it when she turned back to see Reedpaw watching her.

"I did want to know if you're alright, you know," she said, seeing the sadness etched into the markings on his face.

He did not answer immediately. "I'll be okay," he whispered.

Lightpaw swallowed, unwilling to leave her friend behind, but Spiderthorn's voice shouted her name again, louder this time. She waved her tail at Reedpaw, sighing as she emerged into the sun's fading light.

Her patrol stood waiting for her by the Speaking Rock. To her dismay, Beetlepaw stood at its head, with Shademask, Thistleshade, and Rowanstorm right behind.

"How's your stealth coming?" Beetlepaw asked snootily as her littermate approached. Already braced for the question, Lightpaw just gave a slight shrug before turning her attention to Rowanstorm.

"Where are we headed?" she asked, assuming his leadership of the patrol. To her surprise, the old tabby turned to Shademask instead.

"Lead the way," he growled to the black tom and Shademask nodded his head, confidently moving out of the camp and up towards the Twolegplace. Lightpaw fell into step beside Thistleshade at the back of the patrol, avoiding Beetlepaw's backwards glances and Thistleshade's curious looks. All the while, she attempted to ignore the worry she felt for Reedpaw, trying to forget the sadness on his features as she left him to his work.

"Have you seen Reedpaw recently?" she asked Thistleshade in a low tone as they padded through the small snow drifts coating the prairie. Somewhere beneath their paws lay the borderline between the moors and the start of the rock cliffs.

"I haven't visited him in quite some time," the older she-cat admitted. "Is something wrong?" Genuine worry was clear in her eyes.

Lightpaw looked away, wondering if her own gaze mirrored the emotion. "I'm not sure. He just seemed off when I went to see him today."

"Hurt yourself again?" Beetlepaw snickered.

"Eavesdropping again?" Lightpaw shot back, in no mood to put up with the she-cat.

The black apprentice's whiskers twitched. "Or does a certain lack of skill have your tail in a knot?" She kinked up her tail to demonstrate.

The pale she-cat narrowed her eyes before pushing past Beetlepaw and joining Shademask up at the front. At least she wouldn't have to suffer her littermate's gleeful looks up here.

Shademask offered no comment, but allowed her to walk alongside him. Soon, Lightpaw found herself mirroring his steps, a solid *left, right, left, right* as they travelled further towards the Twolegplace border. She almost found herself enjoying the patrol, a certain silent fellowship hanging in the air between herself and the older warrior.

All too soon, they neared the edge of DarkClan territory.

"We'll split up," Shademask decided, and Lightpaw plead silently that she would not end up with Beetlepaw.

"I'll take Beetlepaw," Thistleshade offered before Shademask could say another word, and the younger warrior acquiesced.

"I'll take Lightpaw," he said. "Rowanstorm, you'll be fine on your own?"

The tabby just gave a flick of his tail before following the borderline east. Thistleshade, with a rather cross Beetlepaw in tow, turned west. Shademask continued forward, surveying the tall white walls before them.

"Have you ever been to this border?" he asked Lightpaw quietly, marking a wooden slat.

Surprised by his willingness to converse, as the tom generally preferred silence, the tortoiseshell struggled to find a response. "Only once," she finally said.

The black warrior just nodded, continuing on down the white wall. Unsure of what to do, Lightpaw followed. The fellowship of before had disappeared and an awkwardness had descended upon them. Hoping to fill the silence, Lightpaw asked the first thing that came to her mind.

"How often have you been here?"

The tom paused, giving her a confused look. "Enough to know how to lead a patrol to it," he replied after a moment.

The tortoiseshell held his dark gaze, ears burning with embarrassment. Finally, she looked away.

Shademask seemed amused. "I'll mark this side, why don't you go in the other direction? Rowanstorm should meet you on his way back down." Eager to get away from the tension in the air, Lightpaw went on her way.

She had only travelled a couple of treelengths, marking every twenty steps or so, when she heard thud from above her. Moving away from the white wall, she saw a dark figure sitting atop it. The cat was large, with brown tabby markings and big, green eyes.

"You smell like them Clan cats," he said, watching her every move. Lightpaw felt her fur rise.

"Is that a problem?" she hissed back, claws unsheathing.

"Hey now, no need to get defensive," the tom replied, tucking his

paws in closer to his body. "Though you did kill a friend of mine just over a half moon ago."

Immediately, images of the frightened tortoiseshell filled Lightpaw's head and the feel of bloodied fur beneath her claws made her paws tingle. She shook herself, unwilling to relive the moment.

"Ah, I see you remember," the tabby observed.

"It's hard not to," Lightpaw admitted, guilt momentarily washing over her. Realizing she had let her guard down, she jumped back into her defensive position. "But that doesn't explain why you're here."

The fat kittypet did not reply, instead lazily letting his eyes travel over her body. He seemed completely at ease, while Lightpaw did not let a muscle twitch.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Lightpaw," she replied. "And you are?"

"Charlie," he purred. "I live just over in that Twoleg den with my friend, Minerva."

What strange names, Lightpaw thought. "Just the two of you?"

Charlie nodded. "Yep. We're not like you Clan cats, or the Junkyard Gang, or the alley cats."

Lightpaw blinked. "There's that many cats living in the Twolegplace?" The tabby nodded affirmation again.

The pale she-cat glanced up and down the white wall, looking for any sign of the other patrol members. Rowanstorm would be somewhere off to the east, while Shademask would be moving west. Thistleshade and Beetlepaw would meet him somewhere halfway.

Suddenly, Lightpaw remembered her conversation with Thistleshade, nearly a quarter moon ago.

"You're not a rebel, are you?" Her defensive position was back,

crouched low over her front paws.

The tabby snorted rather loudly. "Who, me? No, never! I have met them, though."

"Wait, here?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

Charlie narrowed his eyes. "I don't believe that is something I should be telling you."

Lightpaw clenched her fangs, frustrated. The kittypet wasn't giving anything up and she knew for a fact no one in DarkClan would tell her anything about the rebels.

"Please," she hissed. "I want to know more about them."

"So you can use it against them?" he growled back, fur beginning to rise.

"No, of course not!"

"I won't let you hurt my friends. They've suffered enough at your claws as it is." The tabby's stance now mirrored her own and Lightpaw, though her fighting skills were sharp, was unwilling to put them to the test, even against a kittypet. Something about the idea of his blood on her claws made her shrink away.

"We've got company," Charlie hissed, ears pulled back. Before she could ask, he disappeared from the fence.

"Slacking off, are we?" The drawl could belong to only one cat.

"No, that kittypet started taunting me," Lightpaw retorted, turning to face Smoketalon. Beside him, Dapplefrost gave her a suspicious look.

"Can't even sneak past a kittypet?" Smoketalon sneered, brushing his tail over the tortoiseshell's back. Lightpaw swatted at it.

"I can too," she growled, hackles rising.

"Just an observation," the grey tom assured, though his hazel eyes glittered.

Lightpaw looked between the two warriors. Smoketalon looked entirely at ease; Dapplefrost seemed out of sorts, eyes darting to the white wall and back to Lightpaw.

"Who was he?" she asked the apprentice.

"Some kittypet. He was angry that we killed his friend."

Dapplefrost's eyes lit up with surprise. "And he told you nothing else?"

Lightpaw shrugged. "Nothing of importance."

Smoketalon's gaze hardened. "Perhaps we should report this to Dawnstar. She would be interested in your conversation with this kittypet."

Something about the way the tom spat out the word made Lightpaw snarl. "Charlie. His name is Charlie."

Dapplefrost curled her lip. "So you do know him."

Too late, the tortoiseshell realized her mistake. "I just met him," she replied calmly. The two warriors remained unconvinced, watching her as if she were a dangerous prisoner. She felt her claws slide out of their sheathes, uncertainty filling her.

"I think we'll need to settle this with Dawnstar," Smoketalon whispered to Dapplefrost, never once taking his eyes off of Lightpaw. "She would want to know."

The warriors advanced on her and the pale she-cat shrank back towards the white wood wall at her back. Both Smoketalon and Dapplefrost had their claws unsheathed, a dangerous glimmer in their eyes. Deep in her stomach, the smouldering fear licked at her, rising higher and higher.

"What's going on here?"

A brief moment of relief hit Lightpaw as Shademask's dark figure approached, confronting Smoketalon. Dapplefrost remained behind, still watching the apprentice.

"She's been fraternizing with the enemy," Smoketalon hissed, just loudly enough for Lightpaw to hear.

Shademask's face remained impassive. "She is on border patrol with me. If she was fraternizing with the enemy, I would know."

"She was having a conversation with a kittypet!" the grey tom spat back.

"I had a kittypet follow me down the wall," Shademask replied calmly. "I don't see you accusing me of treason."

Smoketalon looked ready to kill, but the black tom took no notice. Instead, he padded over to Lightpaw, looking her over.

"She looks like she's just carrying out her patrol duty." When their eyes met, Lightpaw saw the faintest spark of curiosity in his.

Smoketalon looked between the two of them, lip still curled back in a snarl. It was Dapplefrost who stepped forward, drawing the tom away.

"Let's go, let them finish up their patrol," she said to him and after a couple of heartbeats the grey tom stood down. With one last glance in Lightpaw's direction, he turned tail.

Lightpaw let out a breath she had not known she was holding. Watching Smoketalon's retreating back, she suddenly felt a deep hatred for him. Accusing her of treason? The only thing he could accuse her of was curiosity, at best.

"You owe me one," Shademask pointed out quietly. Looking over at him, Lightpaw saw that he looked much smaller now that he was not standing up to Smoketalon. In fact, he looked deflated, much like herself, and somewhat frightened and amazed at the same time.

"Standing up to that tom is both scary and tough," the black warrior explained. "I thought he was going to rip my fur off."

Lightpaw found herself twitching her whiskers. "You and me both."

Their eyes met again and, this time, Shademask looked away first.

"I wonder what they were doing this far out together," he commented, gazing after the warriors' retreating figures. "I don't remember them being assigned to a patrol."

The tortoiseshell flicked an ear, confusion filling her. She only returned to marking the border when Shademask called her sharply and, even then, couldn't put the thought of Smoketalon and Dapplefrost out of her mind.

// Is anyone shipping yet? Let me know what relationships you might see in the future ;)

// chapter 13 //

The snow was unbearably cold against his pawpads, but Dewpaw pushed on. He could not risk being seen as weak, especially when the other trainees already had at least a moon of training on him.

"Let's go, the prey's not gonna' wait around!" Leo's voice boomed over them. Beside Dewpaw, Webpaw's lips drew into a snarl and she pushed herself forward, gaining on Soren and Hazel in front of them. Olive and Finch took up the lead, Crisp close behind.

Dewpaw ignored the pain in his back leg, trailing after Webpaw. He could feel Robin's quick breaths right on his tail, Oats' erratic pawsteps somewhere nearby. Crowpaw brought up the rear.

"Where are they taking us?" he huffed, breath rising up in a cloud. Only two days after his appointment to trainee status, leaf-bare seemed to be in full swing.

"No idea," Robin replied, levelling out with him. They continued racing forward, bounding through snow drifts and dodging around tree trunks.

They stopped short in front of a large brown wall. Gazing up with wide eyes, Dewpaw realized it was a fence – and they all needed to cross it.

Refusing to think about the last time he tried, and failed, to leap atop a fence, the grey tom bunched his legs up beneath him and sprang, hitting the top with his forepaws. His claws shot out, but not in time to keep him from sliding. He hissed in frustration as he hit the ground.

Robin looked back at him, balancing carefully on the edge. She gave him a quick nod and Dewpaw understood. He tried once more, claws unsheathing as he flew upwards, and grunted as Robin grabbed him by the scruff. Pushing against the wood with his hind paws, he helped her with his weight.

"Thanks," he said quickly before they both leaped down on the other side.

"No problem," she responded with a twitch of her whiskers. Oats was now in front of them.

By the time they reached their destination, Dewpaw's legs burned. He and Robin had managed to level out with Oats, though Crowpaw still arrived last.

"Looks like someone's cleaning out the shelter tonight!" Quartz announced, eyeing the black tom. Crowpaw just gave a nod, still catching his breath.

"Today, you will be hunting," Leo announced, stepping forward. "Once you have found a single piece, you are to bring it back here. Then, we will test your battle skills."

Dewpaw's mind raced as he took everything in. It was already nearing sunhigh! How were they to get through all of this before dusk?

"Let's go," Beaver said, flicking his thick tail. "You can hunt anywhere – the copse of trees, the little lake there, or through the snowdrifts."

"I spotted a hare earlier," Jaystrike added thoughtfully. "Perhaps someone will catch that." Dewpaw saw Olive's ears perk up immediately.

The trainees set off, each in a different direction. Dewpaw waited, watching the others. The quickest of the trainees – Olive, Finch, and Soren – headed for the snowdrifts. Hazel, Robin, Oats, and Webpaw found their way to the copse of trees, leaving Crisp and Crowpaw the small lake.

Dewpaw debated his hunting strategy. He wasn't quick enough to hunt hares on open ground, and his back leg prevented him from climbing or jumping up the trees. The lake seemed to be his best bet.

Aware of the mentors watching him, Dewpaw picked his way

through the snow, fur already soaked through. The reeds surrounding the lake were half-frozen, their bulbous brown ends covered with frosty white. He could see Crisp stalking something on the other side of the frozen water; Crowpaw had disappeared.

Dewpaw settled himself beside the lake's edge, gazing at its thin covering. He had learned from Killian that it was called ice and only appeared in leaf-bare when it got cold. It prevented the water from moving and cats from hunting fish, something Dewpaw was surprised to hear Killian was quite proficient at.

Beneath the ice he could see dark shapes flitting about the lake's bottom, far out of reach. Maybe he would ask Killian to teach him to fish one day. For now, he would have to focus on catching land prey.

His crumpled ears were little help in helping him identify any possible hiding locations, so he instead scanned the area with his eyes, nose twitching all the while. There were voles somewhere nearby.

The reeds behind him rustled and Dewpaw turned, fur bristling. His back leg hit the ice and a sickening crack broke the air. A coldness more chilling than anything he had ever felt before hit him and the tom started forwards, right into the reeds.

The bird burst upwards, shrieking in distress, but the tom's weight crashed down onto it. Though his entire body shook with surprise, his instincts kicked in. He silenced it with a quick bite to the neck.

Dewpaw remained in the shelter of the reeds, back leg stinging as some semblance of warmth returned to it. He glanced down at the bird, noting the streak of red on its otherwise glossy black feathers.

Then, it hit him.

He'd *caught* something.

By accident, no less, but it was still freshkill.

Suddenly invigorated, the grey tom got to his paws, carrying his catch proudly back to the meeting place.

Olive noticed him first, the brown-and-white-hare at her paws forgotten. She scowled as he dropped the blackbird beside it. Finch's eyes widened.

"How'd you manage to catch that?" he asked jealously. The small mouse at his paws was a meagre portion.

Dewpaw shrugged nonchalantly. "I used my weight." He flicked his tail at his damaged back leg, hiding the other, still wet one, from view. Olive and Finch did not look convinced but Quartz and Beaver nodded enthusiastically.

"Good work!" Beaver said, nosing the bird. "That'll feed two or three cats tonight."

The newly appointed trainee puffed his chest out proudly.

Soren arrived next with a shrew, then Hazel with a thin bird. Webpaw limped back, complaining about a wrenched claw through the squirrel clamped in her jaws. Crowpaw and Oats both brought back mice, while Crisp brought back a vole. Robin, dragging a crow through the white landscape, returned last.

Leo's eyes lit up at the sight of the freshkill pile the trainees had managed to gather. "I honestly didn't think you would all manage to catch something," he commented, glancing up at the trainees. Dewpaw shifted uncomfortably, hoping Leo's pointed look was not reserved for him alone.

"Now, on to battle training!" Quartz announced. "Dewpaw, since you're the newest apprentice, I'd like you to start. Crowpaw can be your opponent."

Jaystrike's eyes flashed as Dewpaw stepped towards him, unsure of what to do. He had never been formally trained in fighting, only having watched a couple of the trainees' training sessions. Yet, from what he knew, Crowpaw was one of the weakest fighters amongst the group.

With Jaystrike at his back, and Crowpaw and Quartz across from him, Dewpaw took up a stance he believed would aid him in

fighting the black tom. Ignoring the other trainees' snickers as best as he could, he launched himself at Crowpaw.

The snow, too slippery beneath his paws, caused him to land a foxlength short of the other tom. Crowpaw lunged forward quickly, catching Dewpaw on the head with a sheathed paw.

"Retreat!" Dewpaw heard Jaystrike call, but the grey tom could not stand the thought of backing down. He lashed out, hitting Crowpaw's shoulder before scuttling back as fast as he could. His opponent followed, moving to land a blow to Dewpaw's face, but the tom dodged beneath the outstretched paw, going for Crowpaw's chest.

Though the tom was older, his thinness made him rather light. Using his full weight, Dewpaw drove him back, leaping back as the tom brought his paw back down.

Quartz's face showed surprise at Dewpaw's perseverance and the grey tom only continued his assault. Crowpaw hit him time and again, peppering his shoulders, head and flank with blows but still Dewpaw grit his fangs and continued on. Any jab was a small victory in his mind.

Finally, Crowpaw stepped back, breathing heavily. Dewpaw caught his own heart racing, breath coming out in clouds before him.

"I can't beat him," Crowpaw managed to get out, coughing.

Dewpaw's eyes widened as Quartz held his gaze. "Dewpaw is the winner!"

Robin yowled his name first, the others quickly following suit. Jaystrike praised him the loudest, but when Dewpaw turned to thank him he found himself frozen in place. The grey tom had his eyes fixated on Crowpaw, a burning resentment deep within. Afraid to speak, the trainee just nodded his thanks to everyone.

"Mouse got your tail?" Webpaw joked to Crowpaw as they all headed back to the camp. Crowpaw shrugged her comment off, though his fur bristled.

"He got beat by a cripple," Finch said, giving Dewpaw a sly look. "What kind of trainee is he?"

This time, Crowpaw scowled, but kept his mouth firmly clamped around his mouse.

"I just got lucky," Dewpaw said quietly, but the others didn't hear him.

"You've got a lot of work to do if you want to pass the assessments," Olive offered, not too kindly.

Dewpaw, feeling guilty about the others' teasing, moved to walk closer to Crowpaw. Instead, the trainee broke out into a run, leaping the fence in one quick movement and disappearing into the bushes on the other side. Dewpaw gazed after him, confused.

"He's got a lot to think about," Jaystrike muttered through the blackbird in his jaws.

Still, the guilt weighed heavily on the grey trainee.

His back leg, still very cold from his fall into the lake, made movement awkward and jumping the fence was incredibly difficult. By the time he reached camp, Dewpaw felt ready to drop into his nest and sleep for a moon.

Instead, he headed for the healer's. He hoped Mothpelt was not too angry with him for refusing to be her apprentice; it appeared that he might make it as a trainee with Quartz. After he got some herbs from Mothpelt that would hopefully stop the chills running through his body, perhaps he would tell Cinderblossom all about training.

He stopped short when he saw Cinderblossom talking to Mothpelt in hushed tones. Not wanting to disrupt their conversation, Dewpaw turned to leave. Then, he heard his name.

He hid himself in the shadows, watching. Mothpelt appeared to be consoling Cinderblossom. He stretched forward, hoping to catch their words.

"He'll be fine," Mothpelt assured the grey she-cat. Dewpaw tilted his

head, assuming Cinderblossom might just be worried about his training.

"Do you know how taxing it is, worrying about him day in and day out?" Cinderblossom sobbed, curling her tail over her stomach. "He was the only one who survived."

It felt as if a stone had been dropped into his stomach, weighing him down. Dewpaw blinked, flinching back. He wished he could move, especially when the next words came out of her mouth.

"It's so hard being a mother to a kit I never wanted."

This time, the jolt that ran through him thrust him upwards and Dewpaw turned tail, fleeing the scene. He pelted through the makeshift camp, leaping the fence without much trouble, aided by the adrenaline coursing through him. His claws stung as he thrust them into the chilled wood, but pulled himself up all the same.

Then, he was off across the tops of the fences, running whichever way they took him. He struggled to keep his balance, slipping more times than he cared to count, but he kept moving at all costs.

By the time he stopped, breath rushing out of him in great sobbing gasps, he did not know where he was. The fear hit him quickly. Before him lay an icy river, a thin bridge crossing it to his left. Across the river, he could see only more fences, stretching on forever.

It was growing dark, the sun all but gone from the sky. A yellow haze hung over the horizon, broken by blue the colour of jay's wings. The longer he watched the colour fade from the sky, the more aware he became of the cold rolling in, touching everything in its grasp.

He shook as chills hit him. Glancing around, he looked for something – anything – that might shelter him. Only fences stood at his back; the river before him would provide little protection. Strength fading quickly, he padded towards the bridge.

As he approached it, a rank smell hit him. Wrinkling his nose, he

continued forwards, only to find that the smell seemed to be coming from beneath the bridge itself. Along with it came the only source of warmth.

Sighing, Dewpaw followed the scent until he found a round tunnel. It smelled terrible but, glancing at the ice below, he knew it was his only hope of warmth for the night.

Shivering growing worse, the grey tom took one last gulp of fresh air and entered the tunnel.

// Oh my gosh, school starts tomorrow and I am so not ready... Chapter updates from now on will only be on Sundays, unfortunately, as school takes precedence. Expect a Lightpaw chapter this Sunday!

// chapter 14 //

The moment Lightpaw woke she knew something was different. Stirring in her nest, she peered through the entrance to her den only to see a great wall of white. Her nose twitched and her mouth curled into a grin.

"What are you so happy about?" a grumpy Beetlepaw huffed as she curved her back into a stretch.

Lightpaw shot her a dark glance. "Always ruining the fun," she commented, more to herself than her littermate. Beetlepaw scowled all the same.

"I'm not about to have my fun ruined," Stormpaw said excitedly, also having woken. Without another word, he plunged forward into the snow. Lightpaw followed closely behind.

It was not the cold that hit her first but rather the softness of the freshly fallen snow. It felt like new moss, feathers, and clouds – or what she imagined clouds might feel like. In front of her, Stormpaw's grey body cut through the drifts, head hardly high enough to break the snow's surface.

Finally, they broke through to the Speaking Rock, a circular area around it already trampled by warriors' paws. A meagre freshkill pile lay before the leader's den.

"It must have snowed all night," Stormpaw said, turning to Lightpaw. She stifled a purr, brushing a lump of snow off the tom's nose with a flick of her tail.

"I'm surprised it's not colder," she replied. The sun shone brightly above them – sunhigh – making the snow around blindingly white. Not a breeze stirred the tall drifts.

"I'm surprised your mentors haven't clawed your tails off." The voice from above was unimpressed. Lightpaw shrank back from

Dawnstar's glare and found herself stepping on Beetlepaw's forepaws. The black she-cat hissed but held her tongue.

"I'm sure they will punish you all accordingly," the pale tortoiseshell continued with a flick of her ear. Her eyes travelled lazily to a point behind the apprentices.

"There you are!" An exasperated Flamestrike padded forward, Dapplefrost following at his heels. The tortoiseshell looked at Lightpaw briefly, an almost unsettled light in her eyes.

"You're lucky Newtfang's out," Flamestrike continued, looking at Stormpaw pointedly. "I'll make sure Thistleshade puts you through your paces today instead." The grey apprentice shrank back but nodded obediently.

"Actually, Flamestrike," Dawnstar cut in, jumping down from the rock in one graceful leap, "I think you should take Stormpaw out with Dapplefrost and Beetlepaw. I need to have a word with Lightpaw."

This time, it was Flamestrike's surprised eyes that met Lightpaw's, but he too nodded obediently before setting out with the others. None of them looked back as they left the camp.

"Shall we?" Dawnstar said, her question a command. The apprentice had no choice but to follow.

Lightpaw's fur bristled, though the coldness of the den beneath the Speaking Rock made it impossible to tell whether it was from fear or cold. She did not know what to expect from Dawnstar, but just the she-cat's poised trot and quiet calculation were enough to set her on edge.

The DarkClan leader beckoned her in, taking a moment to lick down a stray chest hair before turning her amber gaze back to Lightpaw. The apprentice shuffled her paws.

"Smoketalon reported something strange to me," the tortoiseshell began slowly. "It appears he and Dapplefrost caught you defending a kittypet."

Lightpaw's heart thundered in her chest. Only a moon ago she had been here, listening to Dawnstar accusing her of stealing prey; now, she was accusing her of something far worse.

"I was on border patrol," she said, almost too quickly. "He started taunting me from the fence."

Dawnstar flicked her tail. "Taunting? Or talking to you?"

"Taunting. He could smell DarkClan on me." The apprentice could not sit still.

"And instead of jumping up and attacking him for his insolence you chose to talk instead?" Dawnstar hissed, her fangs suddenly mouselengths away from Lightpaw's nose.

The small she-cat flinched but did not jump away. "I can explain."

The larger she-cat snorted. "I doubt it." Lightpaw opened her mouth to continue but was cut off with Dawnstar's dismissal: "I'll be watching you, make no mistake. Any misstep on your part could mean consequences."

Lightpaw did not want to stay and find out what Dawnstar meant. With a solemn nod and the sense of injustice in her chest growing, she left the den.

//

With Flamestrike out of the camp, Lightpaw found herself wandering. With Dawnstar's eyes on her she didn't dare leave the camp so she instead settled herself down to wait by the old log in camp. It smelled of dew and mould so strongly she wrinkled her nose with displeasure.

From her vantage point on top of the log she could see above the tall snowdrifts covering the camp. Each den had a thin line leading from it to the centre of the camp, where a large ring had been flattened out by multiple paws. Smoketalon and Skunknose shared a mouse near the warriors' den, the freshkill hardly enough to feed the two muscular toms. Scared of having Smoketalon meet her eyes, Lightpaw quickly looked away.

A small black shape caught her eye. It weaved through the snow drifts, one moment here and the next gone. In the entrance of the nursery sat Minkfur, her eyes also trained on the little speck. Antkit, Lightpaw realized, and purred as she saw the kit attack a pile of snow. He was four moons old now, nearly old enough to be apprenticed. She thought of how little the tom was, and how gruelling training could be, and her heart sank.

The unease in her chest grew the longer she watched the kit and, unable to stand the feeling any longer, the she-cat abandoned her post. The smell of mould faded as she padded across the camp to the healer's den.

She didn't know what she expected to find, only that Reedpaw's absence made something within her pang. Though the den still smelled of mint and lavender, like it always did, it felt empty. Lightpaw sighed, turning to leave.

Her sigh turned into a meow of surprise as her nose met the dark fur of someone's chest. She leaped back, her claws threatening to slide out of their sheathes.

"It seems we're both out of luck," Shademask commented, regarding her with amusement.

Lightpaw forced her breathing to return to normal. "You scared me. But yes, Reedpaw's out."

The tom held her gaze for a moment before giving a slight nod. The she-cat found herself half relieved that she was not the one to look away first. Then, she noticed the gash on the tom's foreleg.

"What brings you to the healer's den?" Shademask asked before she had a chance to point out his wound. His reason for seeing the healer was blatantly clear; she, however, found she had none. Only that she had suddenly felt suffocated, a disquiet building up within her.

Her wide eyes watched Shademask, the look of suspicion – no, worry? – that crossed his features. She remembered Dawnstar's words and snapped out of her thoughts.

"I just felt queasy," she replied evenly, breathing in the soothing scent of lavender. "But I think I'll be alright."

The tom nodded. "Well, I'll be here."

They walked past each other, she heading for the entrance and he limping for the moss nest in the corner, and their fur brushed, bodies passing just a hairlength too closely.

//

The forest was quiet but the thoughts rattling about her head made the silence overwhelming, a roiling thunder like that of a storm quickly approaching. She ran and ran, pelting through undergrowth and tearing through brambles, no care for the fur that tangled and tore. She left the camp far behind, yet the feeling of being watched followed.

And followed.

And followed.

She pushed herself to go faster, hoping against hope to outrun the eyes, but they matched her pace for pace, step for step. They were everything at once: an accusatory hazel, a suspicious green, a worried copper.

But, mostly, they were a cold, cruel amber.

Finally, unable to run any longer, she stopped. The trees around her were unfamiliar. She had never been this deep in the forest before. Though her heart hammered with fear at the thought of being lost there was also a sense of comfort. She was far away, somewhere where she could be alone. The air around her smelled only of snow and pines.

Lightpaw remembered the unease she felt sitting on the log. Why had it hit her so suddenly? Why did watching a kit who would soon be in her position make her feel so uncomfortable?

Rowanstorm's harsh growl came to her mind, the way his praise was never really praise, just a dulled thorn rather than a sharp one.

Spiderthorn's calculating gaze, his piercing yellow eyes narrowed as he watched, following every move and judging its strength, its speed, its execution. Smoketalon's lazy grin, barbed words that were meant to hurt.

And, within all of that, a tiny kit – this time white, cream, and blue – shaking with fear but wishing with all its might to please its elders. Always pushing to be stronger, to be faster, to be stealthier, to be *better*.

Why? To what end?

Lightpaw thought of the kittypet, sitting high on his fence. *I won't let you hurt my friends. They've suffered enough at your claws as it is*, he'd said. Is that what her purpose was? To hurt? To kill?

No, she thought. But the thought remained, burrowing somewhere deep inside her where she knew, with almost utmost certainty, that her training was meant for exactly that.

A sudden feeling of loneliness hit her. *I won't let you hurt my friends.* But who were her friends?

An image of Reedpaw appeared first. Stormpaw and Rainpaw and Yewpaw too. She remembered Thistleshade and Oakshade whispering of a better life in the forest and felt unafraid to trust them. Her fur warmed as another image began to form, a black tom with green eyes watching her worriedly.

But no, it couldn't be. Worry shifted to suspicion in her mind and the black fur became the colour of storm clouds, the green eyes a muddled hazel. Her hackles rose, a growl rising in her throat.

She found herself running again, running from thoughts she couldn't leave behind. Maybe, if she ran far and fast enough, her mind would become as tired as her body and her thoughts would stop racing alongside.

The anger hit her mid-step, sharp and cruel, and she stumbled over her own paws, rolling straight into a bramble thicket. Lightpaw stifled her hiss of annoyance.

When the she-cat opened her eyes, she stiffened. The scene before her unfolded slowly. The longer she watched the more sick she felt.

There was no mistaking that dark grey fur, or the black and red of the tortoiseshell entwined with it, so close that it was nearly impossible to say where one body began and where the other ended.

She shouldn't be here.

But the brambles held her fast. Stupidly, she tried to free herself.

The two cats broke apart, rounding on her. The shocked look on Dapplefrost's face slid quickly to something akin to guilt. Smoketalon's bared fangs spoke only of rage.

"And here I thought you wouldn't be causing any more problems," he hissed, aiming a blow at her head. She scrambled out of the brambles, tangled fur bristling. The tom advanced.

"Smoketalon," Dapplefrost warned. The she-cat's voice was soft, hesitant. When Lightpaw looked at her, she saw Flamestrike beside her, the way his tail usually curled around hers. She was betraying him.

Her eyes snapped back to Smoketalon. He was betraying Flamestrike too.

The tom saw the accusation in her eyes. "If you so much as breathe a word..." he hissed.

After everything the apprentice had felt that day, the numbness that entered her felt almost welcome. She nodded her head solemnly, avoiding both of their eyes.

When Lightpaw arrived back in camp, a startled Shademask greeted her at the camp entrance. She brushed right past him, uncaring of the many pairs of eyes trained on her. The healer's den was no longer empty and the eyes that met hers were questioning but patient.

The scent of lavender enveloped her, wrapping itself into the

darkness.

// Wow, it is so good to be back. It's been a long two semesters and a heck of an emotional ride since I last updated. Writer's block has also been keeping me away but everything seems to finally be looking up!

I still can't believe the amount of support I'm getting on Unmasked and Unmarked and that is, largely, the reason why I forced myself to sit down and write this chapter. I will (hopefully) be going back to a weekly updating schedule, so sit tight until next Sunday for Dewpaw's chapter!

Much love for all fans of this novel <3

// chapter 15 //

Dewpaw woke cold and shaking, the pungent warmth around him doing little in the cold morning breeze that had slipped into the tunnel. Cracking his eyes open he found frost clinging to his whiskers. Outside, the sky remained dark and cloudy.

The little tom curled himself up tighter, seeking to save any last vestige of warmth. But the wind only blew more forcefully, as if trying to drag him out of the tunnel. He ignored it; where would he go even if he did leave?

An image of the alley cat camp sprang into his head, the warmth of the abandoned nest and the safety of the greenery, a tiny personal forest just for their use.

It's so hard being a mother to a kit I never wanted. The memory jolted Dewpaw upwards and his paws moved to the entrance of the tunnel of their own accord, leaving behind the ghostly words.

His nose was met with wetness, his whiskers with cold. Below him, the river had ceased to move, ripples and waves frozen in place. It was no longer snowing, but the drifts surrounding the tunnel entrance told Dewpaw that it had snowed all night. Shivering growing worse, he pawed at the snow, part of him gleefully watching it crumble beneath his claws. The other part of him just wanted to sleep.

Finally, he battled his way out of the drifts and found himself at the end of the bridge. It was narrow but tall, probably not meant for many Twoleg monsters. On the other end he could just make out the silhouette of what appeared to be an abandoned Twoleg den. Glancing about, Dewpaw made sure the coast was clear before setting out across it. His paws burned, the bridge's ice-slicked surface shooting tendrils of cold through his body. He sneezed, shaking his head vehemently to clear out the sudden dizziness. Paranoid that a Twoleg monster might creep up on him, he stuck to the edges of the walkway, even though it meant fighting his way

through more snow.

The closer he got to the end of the bridge, the more his sense of unease grew. Eyes fixed on the Twoleg den he soon realized it was not that at all. Instead, a pervasive scent slowly filled the air, a mixture of bitter and sour that made Dewpaw want to gag. When he reached the end of the bridge he saw that the Twoleg den was nothing more than a pile of rag-tag Twoleg items, stacked so high he couldn't make out the items at the top. Beyond, a mountain range of rubbish stretched as far as he could see.

The sound of whirring suddenly hit him, then the piercing screech of a horn, and Dewpaw turned just in time to see a giant monster heading straight for him. Yowling in fright, he threw himself to the side, limp leg just skimming the side of the monster's giant paw. He landed in a nasty-smelling pile of crowfood.

Too scared to move, he crouched, watching as the monster tipped its back, the contents spilling out to form another mountain. It then retraced its steps to the bridge and disappeared down its length, growling the whole while. The tom stared after it in disbelief.

Despite the pungent scents hitting him, his stomach growled, and he realized he had not eaten since the day before. Looking about he thought that surely there had to be something in one of these piles that wouldn't make him sick; one whiff of the air made him think otherwise.

Still, Dewpaw's hunger drove him to approach the newly created mountain. He sniffed tentatively, recoiling as the rottenness hit him. Yet, somewhere beneath the penetrating scent lay the promise of something more fresh and meaty. Taking a deep breath, Dewpaw plunged into the mountain.

He brushed past slimy peels and rotting greenery, wet wood and scraping wires. Now and then he saw something frightful out of the corner of his eye, but he never let himself look too closely. Nuzzling into the pile of crowfood, the smell of freshkill grew.

Before he could find its source a terrible pain spread through his tail and back. Digging his claws into the refuse, Dewpaw attempted

to keep himself grounded but whoever was pulling on him was stronger. The tom found himself back out in the light, surrounded.

He did not even need to look to know he was outnumbered. Three cats surrounded him, two large and grey and one small and russet. Even the small one, fur sleek like ice and eyes blazing, could take him in three moves: pounce, trap, kill.

Dewpaw gulped. He had nowhere to go.

"Let's take a look at what we have here," a dark grey tabby said, his voice deep and rumbling. They circled him, glancing over his body. Dewpaw tried his best not to cower under their piercing gazes.

"A deformed leg," the grey and black mottled tom observed.

"And crumpled ears," the russet she-cat added, her voice tart.

"What are you doing in our junkyard?" the first one asked.

No sound came out of Dewpaw's mouth.

"I believe my brother asked you a question," the mottled tom growled.

Dewpaw's eyes widened as the tom's long fangs came closer to him. "I'm lost," he managed to choke out, his voice cracking.

"Where are you from, kit?" the she-cat asked. If not for his abject terror, Dewpaw may have taken offence to being called a kit.

"The abandoned Twoleg nest," he said quietly.

The three exchanged a meaningful look.

"Looks like you're out of luck then," hissed the tabby, claws sliding out of their sheathes. Dewpaw backed away only to find the mountain of crowfood at his back.

"Chrome, hold on," the mottled tom said. "We should take him to Jet."

The small she-cat tensed. "Surely you wouldn't put a kit through that kind of torture."

The one called Chrome took offense to this, swinging his claws. Dewpaw shut his eyes tight, expecting to feel them slicing through his fur. A hiss of pain hit the air instead and he opened them to see the she-cat lying on the ground, a long scar down her face.

"Chrome," growled the other tom warningly. The tabby, whose paw was once again in the air, gave the mottled cat a murderous look but did not strike the she-cat again.

"We take him to Jet," Chrome muttered, now turning to Dewpaw. The little tom felt himself begin to quake as the two toms approached him, the she-cat watching from behind, and then felt and saw nothing more.

//

When Dewpaw awoke this time he found his shaking was not because of the cold. Some of his earlier fear still remained and, no matter how hard he tried to push it down, the intensity of it remained in his chest.

"Oh good, you're awake." The voice was slow, drawling; uncaring of his fate. Yet, when its owner picked him up, it was gently by the scruff. Dewpaw saw the gleam of silver fur before the light hit of the outside world hit him. He closed his eyes against the unexpected brightness.

The yowls and jeers of multiple cats startled them open again and he found himself curling up, making himself as small as possible. The she-cat carrying him grimaced but did not drop him until she had reached her destination.

The ground was cold. Dewpaw looked up at the she-cat and, to his surprise, found a pretty silver tabby. She sat primly, paws folded over her very round stomach; she was pregnant. Her hazel eyes held little warmth, though, and she nodded to something behind him. The tom turned slowly, dread filling him.

On either side of him stood scrawny underfed cats. He saw the mottled tom and rust-coloured she-cat from earlier as well as a collection of grey and black pelts. Behind them, the mountains of crowfood rose up higher than anywhere else. The mountains met in the middle, at a pinnacle, where a big, soft-looking nest sat. On top of it lay a pitch black cat.

"I am Jet," the tom said, not moving from his perch. "Leader of the Junkyard Gang. You were caught trespassing on our territory. Care to explain yourself?"

Dewpaw gulped as all eyes turned to him. Even without returning their gazes he could feel their eyes travelling over his crumpled ears, down his short spine to the limp leg that he held against the ground.

"I was lost," he squeaked. "Just trying to find food and a way out."

Jet snorted. "There is no way out of the Junkyard. Only the bridge. As for the food – did you really think you could steal from us? Look at my gang. They are tired and hungry. Some of them haven't seen food in a quarter moon."

Dewpaw chanced a look up and saw just how frail some of the surrounding cats looked. He could see the ribs sticking out on a small lilac tabby; the hollow look in some of the larger cats' eyes.

"You were caught trespassing, and there is no excuse for it," Jet continued. "And trespassing has consequences." He said the last word slowly, causing Dewpaw to shiver.

"We should throw him in the river," boomed a deep voice. The blue-grey tom it belonged to had bloodlust-crazed eyes.

"The river is frozen," a darker blue-grey tom replied, sounding slightly exasperated. "Perhaps we should keep him and have him work for us."

"And have another mouth to feed? We're starving as it is." The black she-cat was tiny but her words reached everyone.

"It's either kill him or keep him," Jet cut in. "So what's the verdict?"

The cats looked around at each other, each weighing their options.

"All for kill?" The voice of the silver she-cat startled Dewpaw. He had forgotten she was sitting behind him.

To his dismay, more than half of the cats raised their tails.

A streak of black landed before the little tom and he jumped back, right onto the paws of the silver queen. Jet's eyes weren't on him, but on the pretty she-cat.

"Queenie, would you like to do the honours?" he asked her.

The she-cat did not move.

The look on Jet's face was almost disapproving. "Guess it'll be my job again." His gleaming hazel eyes shifted to Dewpaw, who cowered despite himself.

"Wait!" cried a voice from the crowd just as Jet bared his fangs. The leader pricked up his ears, but his eyes never left Dewpaw. A black and white tom approached them, nose sniffing the air.

"He may smell of crowfood," he said, "but underneath that is alley cat scent."

Jet bristled. "All the more reason to dispose of him."

The other tom laid a white-tipped tail across his leader's shoulders. "We've been trying to infiltrate alley cat territory for moons. There is not enough prey here for us to live off of. Use the kit to barter for it."

Dewpaw looked fearfully up at Jet. The tom appeared to be mulling the information over.

Finally, "Gannet's right. I will lead a group of us down to the alley cat camp next sunrise. We'll see how much they are willing to give us for this little scrap."

A soft cheer rose up from the surrounding cats before they dispersed. Jet set off with a flick of his tail, the silver queen

following him. Dewpaw found himself alone with Gannet, the tom who had saved him.

"Thank you," he managed to say, though his throat was still constricted with fear.

Gannet looked over him once. "I didn't do it for you." He, too, disappeared.

Left alone, Dewpaw wondered what the events of the next day would bring. He thought of Bronco, who would undoubtedly be displeased by the turn of events. Nightchaser's anger already had him cringing. Cinderblossom would be disappointed too.

A pang went through him. He was glad Jet hadn't killed him, but the question remained: did he even want to go home?

// It's a day late but it's here! Forcing yourself to finish a chapter first thing after getting up can really work miracles.

// chapter 16 //

Lightpaw did not tell anyone what she had seen that day in the forest. She was too afraid to.

Smoketalon's eyes followed her as she crossed the camp from the apprentice den to the freshkill pile and she forced her fur to lie flat. It was sundown, just before the dusk patrols were to set out, and DarkClan's members sat in haphazard arrangements, enjoying freshkill and company. The drifts of snow throughout the camp had been flattened by numerous paws, leaving no places to hide.

She glanced over at the warrior's den, where Flamestrike and Dapplefrost sat sharing a mouse. The tom twitched his whiskers in amusement at something his pair said, giving her ear a playful lick. As Lightpaw watched, Flamestrike's ginger fur turned grey and his amber eyes took on a hazel sheen. Then, she blinked, and he was the same fiery colour as always. Her eyes did not dare slide to Smoketalon, who sat not too far off.

Lightpaw snatched a piece of freshkill off the pile, too preoccupied with her thoughts to notice what it was. As the she-cat straightened she came face to face with a worried face.

"Are you really sure you want that measly shrew?" Shademask gave the freshkill in her mouth a pointed look. There was hardly any meat on its thin bones but Lightpaw just gave a nod.

"Positive," she said through the mouthful, eager to get away. She hadn't talked to the tom since running in to him in the healer's den a quarter moon ago. In fact, she had hardly spoken to anyone since then.

She returned to the apprentice den, settling down to eat a little further away from the other apprentice's than usual. Only Stormpaw gave her a curious look. The others, preoccupied with their conversation about training, did not notice her. It was as if she had become ethereal, a spirit that walked through their ranks.

She bit into the shrew and immediately regretted the nod she gave Shademask earlier. The meat was tough and had no taste. Still, her stomach growled with hunger and she ate every last piece of the shrew, crunching the bones between her teeth for good measure.

Though hunger still gnawed at her, Lightpaw knew she could not eat more. There was hardly enough freshkill for the entire Clan; she was lucky she had gotten to eat tonight. She settled her head on her paws and her eyes slowly drifted closed as the light faded from the world around her.

A thud startled her awake. Her nose twitched furiously as she picked up the scent of fresh squirrel rising up from the freshkill before her. Glancing up she saw Spiderthorn's amused face.

"I saw that shrew," he commented. "Come, share this with me." He picked the squirrel up and began to pad in the direction of the log. Aware that the other apprentices were now watching her, Lightpaw followed.

Spiderthorn gestured for the apprentice to take the first bite and, unwilling to displease the deputy, Lightpaw took a small mouthful. The rich taste flooded her mouth, blood still warm.

"It's just the beginning of a hard leafbare," the tom mused after taking his own bite. He was sitting across the freshkill from her, looking entirely at ease. Lightpaw shifted uncomfortably.

"It's my first," she replied before realizing that, as her father, Spiderthorn would be well aware of the fact.

"Leafbare is much harder for an apprentice who tries to run away from her Clan." The deputy fixed her with a stare so intense Lightpaw shuffled backwards. In the moment she was able to hold it she saw anger and – dare she say? – disappointment deep in the depths of his amber irises.

Then, her racing mind and heart came to a sudden stop. "Running away? Why would I be running away?"

Her voice, earnestly confused, caused Spiderthorn to pause.

"You're... not?" All Lightpaw could do was shake her head. Who would accuse her of such an act?

"Smoketalon mentioned you at the Twolegplace the other day, and he said he saw you out alone in the forest just a few sunsets ago." The deputy's own confusion was evident.

The she-cat turned to survey the camp, looking for any sign of the grey tom who seemed to plague her every waking moment. By the time she caught sight of him he was heading out the camp entrance with Pigeonfang, Duskwhisker, and Yewpaw on a dusk patrol.

Then, an awful idea occurred to her. Carefully, Lightpaw remembered her exchange with the kittypet.

"I have been doing the opposite of running away," she said quietly. "My trip to the forest was a hunting trip. I travelled further out, hoping I might find something for the Clan. When I ran into Smoketalon I hadn't had any luck." Her tongue burned with the lie and she had to bite it to keep herself from telling Spiderthorn about Dapplefrost's presence as well. She reminded herself of the way Flamestrike looked at his mate and knew that if she turned her in, and he found out, he would never forgive her.

"What about Twolegplace?" The deputy pressed. "Allying yourself with kittypets is hardly a way to show loyalty to DarkClan." The disapproval in his tone made her fur rise.

"Smoketalon didn't hear what happened," she spat before collecting herself. "The kittypet approached me as I was marking the border. He said something about the rebels."

This time, it was Spiderthorn's fur that rose. When he didn't say anything, Lightpaw continued.

"He said something about the rebels," she repeated. "And a gang of some sort, and alley cats. The rebels must be in hiding with them. He got very defensive when I asked about their whereabouts."

Spiderthorn considered this and Lightpaw, who had told nothing but the truth in her recollection of that night by the Twolegplace

border, willed him to believe her words over Smoketalon's. Then, quite suddenly, she caught sight of someone she knew would back up her side of the story.

"Shademask was there," she said, waving her tail in the tom's general direction, who began to make his way over. "He defended me when Smoketalon started his accusations."

By the tilt of Shademask's head, Lightpaw could tell he had heard her words. The deputy turned to the younger warrior as he arrived.

"Is this true?" he asked.

Shademask did not even look in the apprentice's direction. "It is," he said, voice confident. Lightpaw felt herself glowing at the affirmation.

Spiderthorn held her lightened gaze as if searching for something. When he didn't find what he had been looking for, he nodded.

"I will speak to Dawnstar about this. It seems Smoketalon has not been truthful as of late."

The deputy's words elicited a mental image in Lightpaw but, in that moment, she hardly cared. Finally, someone had listened to her.

A shifting body beside her reminded her she had not won this battle alone. But, before she could thank Shademask for his help, the tom was already slipping away.

//

"Keep your footsteps quieter!" The directive came quietly but Lightpaw took it to heart, softening her pawsteps. The snow made it easier; the soggy leaves beneath it too. The she-cat was quickly coming to know leaf-bare as her favourite season.

"Watch out for the brambles." She slipped around the bush easily, careful not to let them snag her fur. Nothing was stopping her this time.

"Log." She leaped over the felled tree adeptly, making just the

slightest sound as her body dropped to the snow beyond. The apprentice streamlined herself, slithering through the drifts unheard.

Not nearly as silently as her mentor, who suddenly appeared in front of her.

"I thought I was doing well?" Lightpaw said, tilting her head in confusion.

Flamestrike nodded, though there was some hesitation. "Yes, for someone who is constantly being directed. But the point of stealth is for you to be able to recognize all of those things for yourself. I shouldn't have to tell you to be quieter, or to watch out for brambles, or that there is a log coming up."

The she-cat felt her fur burn under his veiled reprimand.

"I'll try harder," she replied, already sliding into her crouch.

Flamestrike continued to bar her way. He was looking at her with an expression she couldn't quite place.

"I heard something rather distressing about you the other day," he said after a pause. Lightpaw's eyes widened as her mentor looked for his next words. When he didn't continue, she pressed him for more, heart pumping wildly.

"It's just that..." The ginger tom levelled his gaze with hers. "Rowanstorm believes you're ready for the next stage of your apprenticeship."

When the words registered Lightpaw realized the faint light was pride. Then, her nerves took the better of her.

"I can't believe you just made me fear for my life like that!" she shrieked, pouncing onto his back. Flamestrike howled with amusement, flipping over onto his back to dislodge her. Putting her training to good use, Lightpaw jumped nimbly, landing on the tom's stomach. Claws sheathed, she pummelled the soft fur of his underbelly until he finally managed to stop revelling in his amusing deception.

"Alright, that was rather mean," he agreed. "But don't you think you're almost ready for the meanness of the warriors' den?"

"Already? I'm only eleven moons old you know."

Flamestrike acquiesced. "You do have one more portion of your apprenticeship to pass before you are able to join the warriors."

Lightpaw brightened at the challenge in his voice. "Tell me what to do and I will pass with flying colours."

The ginger tom twitched his whiskers. "I don't know what it is quite yet. Back when I was an apprentice they made us leave the camp for three days, returning on the third sunset with any prey or prisoners we had caught. If we passed we were made warriors." He puffed his chest out proudly.

Lightpaw nodded, eager to know more. Then, another thought hit her.

"What happened if someone didn't pass?"

The expression that passed over Flamestrike's face was like nothing Lightpaw had ever seen on his features before. The only was she could describe it was morose, as if something had been lost.

"It meant they didn't have a place in DarkClan," he said after a while. Lightpaw longed to know more, but she suddenly became aware that, just this once, she didn't want to know what happened to those not worthy of DarkClan's ranks. Her ears rang with the shrieks of the tortoiseshell sentenced to death by Dawnstar.

"Yours will be quite different, I think," Flamestrike said, tone of voice brighter. He got to his paws, shaking out his fire-coloured fur. "You will know soon enough."

To Lightpaw, it seemed as if she would not know soon enough at all.

//

The third sunset after her conversation with Spiderthorn, a quarter

moon since seeing Smoketalon and Dapplefrost in the forest, Lightpaw was once again summoned to Dawnstar's den. She approached carefully, unable to tell if the summons were friendly or hostile. With Dawnstar, she wondered if summons were ever anything but the latter.

When the scent of two others hit her nose, Lightpaw was all of a sudden reminded of another night. Back then, she had been stuck in camp for a quarter moon, cleaning out dens.

"Still at the same location," she heard Shadowpelt say now. It sounded like a continuation of the report she had given Dawnstar only a moon ago.

"Any other news?" Dawnstar's voice sounded intensely bored.

"Internal strife," came Newtfang's response. "And our inside source is in. We have not heard from him just yet but there will be more soon undoubtedly." Lightpaw could only see part of Dawnstar's face from where she crouched in the den entrance, but what she did see lit up.

"Perfect," the pale she-cat purred. "And we will have even more inside sources soon, if all goes according to plan."

Lightpaw's head swirled but, unwilling to get caught eavesdropping as she had last time, drew herself up. She stepped lightly into the den, startling the two guardians.

"I'm sorry to intrude, but Dawnstar summoned me," the apprentice said. With a wave of Dawnstar's tail, Newtfang and Shadowpelt took their leave.

The cold amber observed Lightpaw for a long moment before the DarkClan leader spoke again.

"Yes. Yes I did."

This time, Lightpaw did not let Dawnstar scare her.

// Sometimes, writing nearly 3k words in one sitting seems like a really daunting task, especially when it's the last day to

hit that Camp NaNo goal... But I managed to do it! And here's the next chapter of Unmarked as a result :)

What do you think Lightpaw's last assessment will be? Will she be able to pass it?

// chapter 17 //

Dewpaw slept fitfully that night, warring between his desire to stay alive and his desire to stay away from the only home he had ever known. He woke multiple times, eyes wild and paws scratching at the air. When dawn finally came he thought of it as a blessing of sorts.

But no one came to get him at dawn. Not that dawn, or the next, or the one after. A quarter moon passed and Dewpaw saw only Penny, who came once every two days to feed him the scraps the Junkyard Gang had left behind. He devoured every last bit, never knowing when his next meal would arrive. Part of him missed hunting; the other deformed and limp part thought this imprisonment, too, might be a blessing.

On the ninth sunrise, just as Dewpaw had become used to the arrangement, he was rudely prodded awake by a black and white paw. Startled, he jumped away to see Gannet looming over him.

"Time to go home," the tom said with a smirk. The grey tom had no choice but to follow.

The Junkyard Gang milled about the centre of their camp, eyes flashing in the darkness. Dewpaw found it odd that they were leaving now but knew better than to share his observation. Perhaps it was a long walk to the alley cat camp and Jet wanted to make sure their deal was over at dawn.

"Follow," was the only word uttered in the stillness and the pitch black form of Jet, nearly as black as the inky night, took up the lead. The silver she-cat took his side, as did the grey tom that had wanted to kill Dewpaw the day he was taken prisoner. The others formed a column. Gannet shoved Dewpaw somewhere into the middle, alongside Penny and another small, black she-cat. Her shoulders seemed tense and she cast Dewpaw a sidelong glance.

"I'm Flea," she said and, though it was dark, the tom knew why she

carried the name.

"Dewpaw," he replied quietly, focusing his attention on moving. Jet had set a brisk pace that made it difficult for him to keep up, especially as the snow grew thicker.

They crossed the bridge purposefully, then turned into the maze of white fences beyond. Dewpaw scrambled up onto the fence with some difficulty but refused to accept help from the others. From their stifled purrs of amusement, he knew he should not have expected help anyway.

The trainee himself did not know where the alley cat camp lay after his mad dash away from it nearly a half moon earlier, but Jet seemed to know exactly where they were going. His gang travelled along the fence tops like shadows, hardly making a sound and blending into the night. As they neared the Tumble Down Den, which Dewpaw could sense in the rising excitement in the air, he began to feel a growing disquiet.

There was hardly a sliver of light in the sky when the alley cat camp appeared. Dewpaw followed along cautiously, the feeling in the pit of his stomach growing the closer they came.

Then, they were on the fences adjacent to Tumble Down Den and Dewpaw suddenly became aware of the flash of claws. By the time he opened his mouth to yell a warning someone had pushed him off the fence to the ground below.

"Attack!" The air filled with growls and screeches as the Junkyard Gang hit the ground. Dewpaw twisted to keep from being trampled under their paws. Hearing the alley cats' yowls of surprise, he felt sick to his stomach. This was his fault. He had let this happen.

Unthinking, he raced into the fray, moving as quickly as he could. He caught sight of Lily and Mothpelt, backs to each other, fighting off two of the gang she-cats as best as they could. They were healers and so had little battle training but, by the time Dewpaw was even halfway to them, Bramblefire had dropped down from above to take on their attackers.

Olive and Robin were backed against a fence but holding their own; Webpaw and Leo fought side-by-side, a whirlwind of claws and fur. Jaystrike and Beaver fought in their own corners of the camp, each snarling things at their opponents that Dewpaw was sure he should never repeat. Above it all, Bronco balanced on a tree branch, swiping at the jet black figure of the gang leader.

Dewpaw swerved, taking a new path to the crumbling walls of the den. He passed Finch and Hazel, Crowpaw and Soren, Roxanne and her flashing fangs. His heart pounded, though not with as much fear and guilt now that he saw how well the alley cats were holding up against the Junkyard Gang. That all fell away when he came upon the Tumble Down Den.

Killian was not a small cat by any means but in that moment, curled up in pain before the looming figure of Gannet, the tom looked as small as Dewpaw imagined he himself looked to others. Behind the wounded tabby stood another smaller cat, grey fur nearly blending into the shadows and, with trepidation, Dewpaw realized that Gannet meant to kill her.

The tom raced forwards, breath coming out in short gasps and leg dragging uselessly behind him. The black and white junkyard cat advanced, slowly but purposefully. The grey she-cat hissed, a single paw flashing out to catch her attacker across the nose. Her claws must have found their mark because Gannet hissed in pain and prepared to pounce.

"No!" Dewpaw screeched, launching himself off the ground just as Gannet leaped towards the she-cat. He was hardly big enough to hurt the junkyard cat, but the force of his flight caused the tom to hit the wall behind Cinderblossom. He recovered quickly, turning to face Dewpaw, who now stood between Gannet and his mother.

"Move, kit," Gannet growled, eyes ablaze. It took all of Dewpaw's courage to not turn and run.

"No." Despite his limp back leg Dewpaw stood his ground.

"This battle does not concern you," the tom hissed back, taking a step forward.

"This is my home, of course it concerns me," he replied fiercely, pulling himself up taller.

"Dewpaw," Gannet said and the trainee suddenly realized that he had never heard any of the junkyard cats use his name. The tom repeated it, as if mulling it over. "That doesn't seem like an alley cat name to me. That's a Clan name."

Dewpaw's heart skipped a beat. Then, a shred of confidence returned.

"Then you have no business attacking her either." He waved his tail at his mother, who continued to stand in shocked silence behind him. "Cinderblossom isn't an alley cat name."

Gannet's eyes narrowed and Dewpaw braced himself for the next blow.

A commotion on the other side of camp distracted both parties and, before Dewpaw could say anything, Gannet was off in a blur of white and black fur. The sounds of battle rose and the trainee, curious, headed for the exit.

A soft but firm grip on his scruff pulled him back. "It's not safe out there. Stay here." Cinderblossom pushed Dewpaw into Killian, who huffed in surprise. The tabby was still curled up on the ground, his sides and face bloodied.

"But Cinderblossom!" Dewpaw started indignantly. Had he not just saved her life?

The pleading in her hazel eyes stopped him in his tracks. "I've lost too much. I can't lose you too."

After a moment, the stunned trainee nodded. Still, when Cinderblossom moved for the exit, he followed, keeping to its edge to avoid being seen.

From the shelter of the ruined den he watched the fight unfold: Sprucetail and Condor a flurry of sharp edges and soft fur, twisting and turning in ways Dewpaw had never seen a cat move. The two alley cats were outnumbered five to two but the fighting skills of

the Junkyard Gang were nothing compared to theirs. Another black blur passed on the edges of Dewpaw's vision as it joined the fray, white-rimmed eyes flashing in time with his swipes. In the trees above, the leaders of the two groups exchanged blows and curses.

A shriek cut through the night suddenly and, for a moment, everyone halted. All eyes turned to the fence top where a cream-coloured tom hung onto the wood with all his might. Above him stood a silver shape, silver claws flashing in the waning moonlight. Her teeth flashed in a wicked grin as she bore down on the tom. Below him circled two junkyard cats, ready to strike.

All around Dewpaw the fighting had resumed but he could not tear his eyes away from Oats, who scrabbled at the wood with his back paws. Dewpaw raced forward; even a distraction would let Oats fall to the ground without being mercilessly attacked.

"Not my littermate, you mangy junkyard cat!" The silver she-cat let out a yowl as someone hit her side. The two cats tumbled off of the fence, a ball of silver and cream. The junkyard cats below scattered.

Crisp and Queenie broke apart, a frightened Oats dropping down after them. The two cream trainees faced the junkyard she-cat with bared fangs. She backed away, obviously rattled.

The smallest sliver of light was now visible on the horizon and the sounds of battle had died down. Looking around, Dewpaw saw each junkyard cat flanked by at least two alley cats, the lust gone from their eyes. Into the stillness jumped Bronco, Jet's scruff in his jaws.

"Jet, what a pleasant surprise," Bronco snarled, throwing the junkyard leader down at Nightchaser's paws. Dewpaw, even from his position near the den, could see the hurt pride in the set of Jet's shoulders.

"You should train your young ones better," Jet hissed back, getting to his paws. "I will not have my territory being trespassed upon." His tail flicked at Dewpaw and the little tom shrank into the shadows.

"Dewpaw is not one of mine," Bronco replied, voice steely. "He is

one of Nightchaser's rebels."

Jet turned, sizing Nightchaser up. The junkyard cat was larger and more muscular but something about Nightchaser's stance made the rebel seem more important – almost imperial.

"Thank you for returning him safely to us," Nightchaser said slowly. "But now it is your turn to pay for trespassing upon alley cat territory."

The black tom paused, lazily circling Jet. The entire camp held its breath.

"The alley cats have been gracious in taking us in," Nightchaser began. "We understand that sharing territory, food, and water can be tough on a group of cats. Having two groups – three, if we separate alley cats and rebels – puts a strain on resources." He trailed off, fixing Jet with an unblinking stare.

"Therefore, we must eliminate one of those groups." Nightchaser raised his head, now speaking to everyone. "The rebels need numbers in order to overtake DarkClan. I offer you, the Junkyard Gang, a chance to join us. Our territories will be united, our resources available to all. When we take DarkClan by force that territory, too, will be split between all of us."

The camp remained silent. Out of the corner of his eye, Dewpaw saw some of the Junkyard Gang take a tentative step forward but one look from Jet made them falter.

"And the alternative?" Jet growled low in his throat.

Nightchaser narrowed his eyes. "You are forcibly removed. Perhaps from the territory, but more likely from the world of the living."

A couple of gasps filled the camp and, Dewpaw was surprised to see, one of them came from Cinderblossom. Her eyes were filled with hurt and something almost like hatred. He looked away quickly, eyes sliding to Nightchaser's imposing figure. Behind him, Bronco looked both triumphant and appalled.

"You have until sundown," Nightchaser let the Junkyard Gang

know. "The quicker you make your decision the more likely it is we will one day trust you. Choose carefully."

Under his watchful gaze, a few of the junkyard cats stepped forward. Among them, Dewpaw saw Flea, Penny, and the tom who saved him from Chrome that first day in the junkyard. Gannet held his ground.

Nightchaser nodded to Bronco. "Let's treat our wounded. By tonight we'll know who values their lives."

Dewpaw felt fatigue hit him as the events of the night came to a close. His shoulders and back ached, the deformed leg suddenly too heavy. When Cinderblossom came to him, licking at his face and chest, he let her, glad to be somewhere that felt like home.

// Hope everyone's having a good week! Currently trying to raise my weekly word count to see if I can update twice a week so we can see more of both of our main characters... We'll see how it goes!

// chapter 18 //

Sunlight filtered through the bare branches high above, dappling the snowy forest floor. Lightpaw's own dappled pelt moved over it, silent as an owl, one paw carefully in front of the other. Ever since her last stealth session with Flamestrike, she had decided that leafbare was her favourite season. No rustling leaves on the ground or big bushes to push through. Only snow, pristine and cold against her paws.

The scrawny squirrel did not even squeak when her claws pinned it or when her fangs broke its neck. She pushed aside the temptation to devour it there and then; others needed it more than she did. Lightpaw buried the squirrel and continued her hunt.

Somewhere nearby, Rainpaw and Beetlepaw did their own hunting. The three apprentices had been delegated by Flamestrike and Dapplefrost, who needed the day off to visit Reedpaw. The she-cats did not complain – it gave them all a chance to practice their skills before the final assessment, which would be announced any day now.

By the time the sun was nearing the horizon, painting the sky in swaths of fire and plum, Lightpaw had not had any luck. Her front paw ached from the thorn stuck in it, and her rear paw stung from the buried branch she had tripped over, scaring away the bird she'd been stalking.

"Catch anything?" Rainpaw asked when she caught sight of her.

Lightpaw nodded. "Just need to retrieve it." Then, through clenched teeth, "I forgot how much thorns hurt."

"I haven't," Beetlepaw said, joining them. She proudly dropped two mice to the ground. "I constantly have thorns in my side."

Lightpaw did not dignify her littermate's words with a response. She limped back into the forest to retrieve her squirrel.

//

The healer's den was a lot more crowded and loud than usual. The coughing hit Lightpaw first, then the sharp smell of a herb she did not know. Her mouth watered around the squirrel and mice she held in her jaws.

Reedpaw was nowhere to be found and Lightpaw cursed internally as the thorn in her pad throbbed. She decided to drop the freshkill off, laying one of the mice in Reedpaw's den – his favourite freshkill – and bringing the other two pieces carefully over to the sick lying at the back of the den.

Minkfur sat with her tail curled around her tiny kit who, every so often, coughed and stirred in his sleep. Her face was worried and her shoulders sagged. She hardly had the energy to thank Lightpaw as the apprentice dropped the other mouse before her. The squirrel she lay before Spiderthorn, who was curled up in a tight ball of black fur. She lingered, looking down at the steady rise and fall of his sides. In his peaceful state he didn't look sick at all.

"Lightpaw, please move back." Reedpaw's voice startled the she-cat and she jumped back, landing awkwardly on the thorn.

"Get it out," she cried, clenching her teeth tight against the pain.

To her surprise, Reedpaw's face almost brightened. Minkfur hissed angrily at the noise, curling her tail tighter around Antkit.

The healer took a quick glance at Lightpaw's pad. "Oh, it's only a thorn. I'll have it out in no time."

He disappeared, returning with a branch and some herbs.

"Bite down on this." Lightpaw dutifully took the stick between her teeth.

Then, quick as a flash of lightning, the thorn was out and Reedpaw was applying a poultice of herbs on her pad. He wrapped it swiftly in cobwebs, nodding once at his handiwork.

"Now, I really have to ask you to leave," he said, glancing back at

his other patients. "I don't want you getting sick too." If not for his pleading gaze, Lightpaw might have stayed.

"I brought you some freshkill," she said by way of goodbye before slipping out of the den.

The camp was in a slight state of panic. With their deputy sick, Skunknose was doing his best to put together patrols. In Lightpaw's opinion, the old tom was much better at solo hunting than organization but she kept that to herself.

"Dusk patrol tonight will consist of Newtfang, Flamestrike, Stormpaw, Lightpaw, and myself," Skunknose called now. "We will head to the Twolegplace border. The other patrol, led by Rowanstorm with Shadowpelt, Oakshade, Duskwhisker, and Yewpaw, will take a look at the moors, where we picked up the scent of a fox not too long ago."

Lightpaw groaned, glancing down at her cobweb-bound paw. By the time she returned to camp tonight it would be soaked through.

"Skunknose!" Lightpaw glanced up to see Flamestrike approaching their patrol leader. "I was actually wondering if I could stay in camp tonight. You see, Dapplefrost – "

Skunknose fixed Flamestrike with a point blank stare. "Is your first duty to the Clan?"

Flamestrike's face adopted a surprised expression before melting into blankness. "Yes, you're right." He dipped his head.

A purr reached the group as Smoketalon approached. "Don't worry, I'll look after her while you're gone. You have nothing to worry about." Flamestrike nodded, brushing his tail over the grey tom's shoulder in a show of trust.

"Let's head out then," Skunknose said, looking around for the other members of his patrol. His gaze landed on Lightpaw's bandaged paw.

"Not another training injury, is it?" He sounded exasperated.

Lightpaw bristled, remembering the shoulder injury dealt to her by Smoketalon a couple moons prior. "No, just a thorn in my pad while hunting."

"That's roughly the same thing, isn't it?" Skunknose replied. The more power Skunknose had in camp, the less Lightpaw liked him.

Before she could retort, a tom's voice cut her off. "Give her a break, at least she brought back some freshkill today. I'll take her place on the patrol."

Skunknose bristled slightly – he himself had not brought back any prey to the camp today. Still, he accepted the offer with a brisk nod, breaking out into a quick trot towards the camp entrance.

"Thank you," Lightpaw said quietly, not quite meeting Shademask's eyes.

He brushed his pelt along hers as he padded by in pursuit of the patrol.

//

Four days later her paw was as good as new and Lightpaw, once again, found herself on a hunting patrol. The pressure of finding freshkill was a lot higher this time; since her last hunting trip the entire Clan had only been fed once. The sickness was spreading too – Minkfur, with all her time spent in the healer's den with Antkit, was now coughing and Yewpaw was nest-ridden. Spiderthorn's own coughing had grown worse.

After a day in the forest, however, Lightpaw did not have a single piece of freshkill to show for her hunt. Rainpaw returned with one sparrow, it's wing broken before she caught it.

"Where's Beetlepaw?" Rainpaw asked as the two she-cats sat at the bramble bush that served as their meeting place.

Lightpaw shrugged. "She should be heading back now." Her mind was not on her own littermate, but on Rainpaw's littermate. Over the course of the past few days she had seen Reedpaw racing about the camp, organizing and re-organizing his herb stock in search of

whatever herb it was he needed to cure the coughing. There had been patrols sent out in search of it too, but Lightpaw had never been allowed to join one.

"There she is!" Rainpaw said excitedly. "And look, she's got something!"

Sure enough, Beetlepaw came strutting up to them, a rabbit hanging from her jaws.

Lightpaw cocked her head. "Where'd you get that? I thought we were supposed to be hunting in the forest?"

Beetlepaw's eyes glinted. "Lot of good that did you. I decided to try my luck on the moors and it looks like I got lucky!"

If not for the fact that the rabbit would feed four of their Clanmates, Lightpaw might have felt angry. "The Clan needs a good catch like this one. We should be heading back."

Even behind the bulk of the rabbit, Beetlepaw's smug grin did not disappear.

The camp was busy again but nearly everyone stopped as the small hunting patrol walked in. Hungry eyes stared at the rabbit, which Beetlepaw placed gingerly in the small indent meant for the freshkill pile. Besides the rabbit and Rainpaw's sparrow, only a half-frozen shrew remained. As much as Lightpaw would have loved to eat, she knew it was not her turn tonight.

She headed for the healer's den instead, poking her head in to see if Reedpaw was awake. Lately, he'd been staying up throughout the night to take care of his patients, who coughed relentlessly, and took naps throughout the day. She had watched him toss and turn the day before, and the day before that too.

"Lightpaw, how many times do I have to tell you to stay away?" Reedpaw's tired voice came from his herb storage.

The she-cat felt the slightest twinge of guilt. "I'm sorry. I'm just worried about you. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Reedpaw's tabby head poked out of the storage area. "Unless you can find a crop of catmint and bring it back there's really nothing that will help." His amber eyes were cloudy from sleepless nights and his fur untidy from the stress of taking care of his patients.

"Is that what the patrols are for?" Lightpaw asked. "I'll join one if you need me to."

"No, you won't have time," Reedpaw replied. "They're announcing the final assessments tonight, and I wouldn't want you to miss it."

A shock ran through Lightpaw. "Even with Spiderthorn sick?" She found it hard to believe Dawnstar would announce the final assessments without her deputy and mate at her side.

Reedpaw nodded. "Lightpaw, I need you to leave. I don't want you getting sick." He went back to rummaging in his herb stock.

Still, Lightpaw held her ground.

He let out an exasperated sigh at her stubbornness. "Lightpaw, *go*. If you really want to help me so badly, take these to Pigeonfang and Dapplefrost." He waved his striped tail at a pile of leaves.

It took Lightpaw a moment to understand. Pigeonfang's belly, growing rounder every day, meant her kits would be due soon, so the herbs were probably meant to help her along. Dapplefrost, on the other hand...

"Dapplefrost's pregnant?" Lightpaw wasn't sure if the horror in her voice came across. She squeezed her eyes shut against the image of Smoketalon and Dapplefrost in the forest.

"Yes, Flamestrike's been in here nearly every day asking me questions and, honestly, I don't know the answers to most of them." Now, Lightpaw could see the beginnings of panic in Reedpaw and any conviction of leaving him alone disappeared completely.

"I'm not leaving until you tell me what to do," Lightpaw said firmly.

She jumped back as Reedpaw's fangs snapped. "No. Out,

Lightpaw. *Now*." The hard light of his eyes pierced through her.

The she-cat glanced at the back of the den once more. "Can I at least say goodbye to Spiderthorn?" If her assessment really was being announced tonight, who knew when she would see him again, if at all?

Reedpaw seemed to understand this and he nodded, but only after giving her a pointed look. Lightpaw promised to be quick and approached the sleeping form of her father. His sides still rose and fell but in a much more ragged pattern.

"I'm starting my assessment today," she told him quietly, brushing her tail over his. "I hope I can make you proud." Checking to see if Reedpaw was looking, she quickly pressed her nose into Spiderthorn's side.

To her surprise, the tom stirred and his eyelids opened just enough to show the amber beneath. He said something, his voice choking with disuse. Lightpaw leaned in closer, trying to hear. Spiderthorn tried again, tongue tripping over the syllables.

"I don't understand," she whispered, shaking her head.

"M-Morningfire."

Lightpaw froze.

"I... thought... I'd never... see you again."

Lightpaw shook her head. "No, it's Lightpaw. Spiderthorn, it's Lightpaw, your daughter."

But Spiderthorn's eyes were once again closed, his breathing more steady than before. Lightpaw backed away slowly, then hurried out of the healer's den, nearly crashing into Flamestrike as he came to collect Dapplefrost's herbs.

// Another bit of a filler chapter but I think we learn a bit more about a lot of the characters here so hopefully it's worth the read! Have a good week :)

// chapter 19 //

The camp, despite its increased population, stood eerily quiet. Every corner hosted a different group: the east fence the alley cats, who watched the ongoings with interest; the west fence the remaining junkyard cats, who seemed both relieved and uncomfortable at once; and in the shade of the Tumble-Down Den the rebels, who shifted with unease and dread.

For, in the centre of the camp, stood three defiant figures: Jet, Queenie, and Fang, a rather large black and white tom who had been second-in-command to the junkyard leader and his littermate. The three of them, scarred up from fighting to get away for most of the night, did not resist their executioners: Nightchaser, Condor, and Killian. Not far off, Bronco watched the proceedings with dismay, Roxanne shaking her head at his side.

"Don't do this!" The cry came not from the assembled junkyard cats but from the depths of the Tumble-Down Den, where Olive and Finch held Cinderblossom down to keep her from rushing the executioners. The she-cat had been arguing with Nightchaser all night, trying to change his mind, but nothing she said had moved him.

"These three cats have refused to join our ranks, to unite the alleys and junkyards of this Twolegplace," Nightchaser announced. "For this, they will be killed – "

"She's pregnant with kits, Nightchaser!" came Cinderblossom's screech, quickly followed by scuffling and strained silence.

"Killed," Nightchaser repeated, "to prevent future uprisings or ideas of rebellion."

Dewpaw blinked against the harsh dawn sunlight. Most of the junkyard cats had opted to join this camp by sundown the previous night. The others, thanks to Cinderblossom's pleading with Nightchaser, had been given time until dawn to make up their

minds. Truthfully, he was not surprised that neither Jet nor Queenie had agreed. He was, however, wary of Gannet's decision to stay, as well as Chrome's, who had wanted to kill Dewpaw when he initially wandered into gang territory.

The three executioner's readied themselves – Nightchaser next to Jet, Condor over Queenie, and Killian beside Fang. Dewpaw saw the most imperceptible of nods from Nightchaser and their claws flashed at the ready.

"I hope DarkClan kills all of you," Jet hissed, just loud enough for the entire camp to hear. Nightchaser's face twisted into rage.

Claws fell and Dewpaw blinked furiously, willing himself to keep his eyes open. He would not appear too weak to watch the execution of the cats who held him hostage.

"Stop this immediately."

Too late, Fang fell to the ground, blood gurgling from his throat as the life left his eyes. Killian jumped away, claws bloodied, as a black shape barrelled into first Condor, then Nightchaser. Jet and Queenie looked surprised but remained where they were.

"What are you doing?" Nightchaser growled, turning on the newly arrived cat.

"I could ask the same of you," Sprucetail replied, tail lashing angrily. The dawn light made her dark fur gleam and illuminated the three long scars on her shoulder.

Dewpaw shifted as the two black cats circled each other, moving slightly away from the spectacle. All around him, others leaned forward to take in Sprucetail's challenge of Nightchaser's leadership.

"You know just as well as I do that if we let them go they will go straight to DarkClan," Nightchaser hissed back, yellow eyes like fire as he followed each and every one of Sprucetail's movements.

"Then let them," she said. "What do you think DarkClan will do to them? If they are still the same bloodthirsty honour-less cats that I remember – the ones you should remember too – then they will not

spare them. They will execute them just as you are doing now, except in a way that forces the entire Clan to participate in their bloodbath to weed out the weak among them."

Even from Dewpaw's position by the walls of the Tumble-Down Den, he could see Nightchaser's white-rimmed eyes narrowing. Yet, the tom had paused in his circling.

Sprucetail, too, stopped. She lifted herself up to her full height, holding her head high. "Tell me I'm wrong," she hissed.

Dewpaw had never seen Nightchaser bend before another cat. To his utter amazement, the black tom gave a small nod, keeping his ears back and tail low in a show of submission. Sprucetail nodded back, turning to Jet and Queenie.

"Get out of our sights," Sprucetail hissed. "And know that DarkClan will not spare you, or your kits, if you go to them." Looking dazed, the two cats took one last look around the camp before bolting over the fence.

Next, the imperious she-cat turned to the remaining junkyard cats, who cowered before her. "Anyone else who chose to comply because they were too cowardly to face death: leave before Nightchaser changes his mind."

The junkyard cats looked at each other, as if gauging the truth of Sprucetail's words. The first to move was Chrome, followed closely by a blue-grey tabby. Of the remaining three toms and three she-cats only Gannet met Sprucetail's gaze.

"Welcome to Tumble-Down Den," Sprucetail said. "Let's find you some freshkill." The junkyard cats brightened up significantly, particularly Flea, the small bug-ridden she-cat.

But Sprucetail was not done yet. She now approached Nightchaser, Condor, Killian, and Bronco, who stood over Fang's dead body.

"Condor and Killian, you will dig a grave for this cat by sundown," she instructed. Though she stood only to Condor's

shoulder, the tom nodded without complaint.

"I want the junkyard cats to feel welcome," she announced to the rest of the assembled cats. "After everyone has been fed, hunting and border patrols will resume as normal. Training will take place today, with our new additions in attendance to gauge where their skills lie. Does anyone have any questions?"

Not a breeze stirred as everyone in the camp watched Sprucetail wide-eyed. Dewpaw felt himself shivering, though the day itself had not dawned as cool as those prior.

The she-cat nodded before turning to Nightchaser and Bronco, who suddenly seemed like two guilty kits standing before their chastising mother.

"I'm losing my patience with the way you two fight for leadership. Figure it out and don't ever make me clean up your mess like that again."

From dawn until dusk, the camp ran as smoothly as it ever had.

//

In the quarter moon following Dewpaw did his best to return to some semblance of normalcy. He woke every morning at dawn in his nest next to the other trainees, give his fur a quite lick, trained and hunted with the others, ate freshkill, and returned to that same nest every night. Each day dragged on and on, unchanging.

The only cats he talked to were Crowpaw and Killian, both of whom expressed concern over his being held hostage by the Junkyard Gang. The first day, Crowpaw looked Dewpaw over, pawing at his fur gently, as if looking for injuries. Assured that Dewpaw didn't look any worse for wear, Crowpaw said nothing more of Dewpaw's disappearance.

Killian, however, asked many questions. Having had a run-in with the Junkyard Gang himself, the tabby was wary of the remaining cats and Dewpaw often caught him shooting murderous glances in Gannet's direction. It came as a shock to the tabby when

Dewpaw told him of Gannet's interference in his would-have-been execution but the information didn't change Killian's views of the tom. He steered clear of the group but seemed curious, just as everyone else was.

The Junkyard Gang kept to themselves. Both Bronco and Sprucetail approached them initially, offering to let them join patrols and training, but Cobalt, a dark blue-grey tom who appeared to be the oldest of the group, as well as the self-appointed leader, denied their offers. They would hunt for themselves, and Bronco agreed to the request. Nevertheless, the alley cats and rebels kept a close eye on their new neighbours.

Nightchaser's agitation grew night and day, to the extent that everyone aside from Cinderblossom and Sprucetail avoided him. Then refusal of the Junkyard Gang to join training, at least in Dewpaw's mind, had frustrated the already off-balance tom. Dewpaw himself avoided any contact with Nightchaser, as well as both Cinderblossom and Mothpelt.

Following the skirmish he'd caught Mothpelt gazing at him sadly. Unable to take the pity in her eyes Dewpaw refused to acknowledge her. Cinderblossom he avoided because of the words that continued to echo in his head. Besides, if Cinderblossom found it so hard to be a mother to him then perhaps he could alleviate her of the responsibility by staying away from her.

Yet the weight of those words weighed heavily. They repeated themselves over and over again in his mind. He gritted his fangs against them, unsheathed his claws, kinked his tail.

He didn't realize how deep his claws had buried in the tree trunk before him until a familiar voice called his name. Shaking, he withdrew them.

"Are you alright?" Robin stared at the claw marks with wide eyes.

For the first time that day Dewpaw took in his surroundings. He was standing in a copse of trees not far from where he'd caught his first freshkill. Under the guise of a hunting patrol he had managed to slip away from camp when he caught Cinderblossom heading his

way. Somewhere nearby Olive and Webpaw continued their search for prey.

"Fine," he replied after a few moments. The bare branches above clicked against each other in the leaf bare wind.

Robin did not look convinced but didn't press. "Have you caught anything?" she asked instead.

Dewpaw shook his head. "Missed a mouse by a whisker-length."

"That's too bad," Robin replied and, unlike most cats in the group, Dewpaw could tell her words were genuine. "I thought I heard a woodpecker somewhere in this direction but it must have been your claws in the wood." Her eyes returned to the scores, deep enough that Dewpaw's claws ached.

"Just relieving some tension." The tom rose to his paws, careful to keep his balance, and headed into the forest. To his surprise, he heard Robin's soft pawsteps follow. The she-cat was quiet and an amazing hunter; Dewpaw's hunting skills would never match hers.

"What did they do to you?"

Dewpaw drew his ears back in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"The Junkyard Gang." Robin sped up to match his speed. "You've been distant since you came back, even more so than usual."

"I'm just focusing on my training."

"No, you're not. Crowpaw beat you in battle training the other day."

"He had extra practice while I was being held hostage."

"No, he didn't. He spent most of his time looking for you against the orders of the mentors."

Dewpaw twitched his whiskers in surprise. Crowpaw hadn't told him that.

"There's something on your mind distracting you," Robin continued. "Maybe if you talk to someone it will help get it off your mind."

Dewpaw stopped and rounded on the she-cat. "And who exactly should I talk to?" His words more harsh than he'd meant them.

Robin did not back down. "Well, I'm right here. But if not me, then perhaps Crowpaw. He cares about you a lot."

The grey tom narrowed his eyes at the suggestion. His thoughts were his own burden to bear.

"There's nothing on my mind." And he disappeared into the bushes, determined to catch some prey to prove it.

//

Olive returned to camp with a blackbird; Webpaw with a mouse; Robin with the woodpecker she thought she'd heard. Dewpaw dragged himself in, exhausted from a fruitless day of hunting. He avoided Robin's pointed stare and crawled into his nest. The busyness of the camp did not prevent him from falling into a deep sleep.

When he woke again the stars were out, barely visible through the heavy snow clouds high above. Beside him, Crowpaw snored and Crisp and Oats slept in a tangle of limbs. Carefully, Crowpaw extracted himself from his nest.

Soren and Leo sat guard at the edge of camp. Not wanting to disturb them, Dewpaw headed for the bushes at the edge of Tumble-Down Den.

He had made it only a couple of foxlengths when he heard hushed voices.

"We have to do something." A fretful voice full of fear. "He's going to kill himself if we don't."

"We're doing our best, Cinderblossom," another voice assured. "But taking DarkClan down while the trainees are not yet fully

trained will only result in casualties on our side. We aren't ready. Nightchaser knows that and you know he wouldn't risk losing so many in a battle again."

Again? Dewpaw shifted slightly, enough to afford him a view of the speaking cats.

Cinderblossom and Sprucetail sat in the shadows of Tumble-Down Den. Next to them, Mothpelt, Mira, and Lily sat listening. Quartz and Roxanne were nodding their heads in agreement with Sprucetail's words.

"It will be a while before all of the trainees are ready. But you must remember that casualties will always come as a result of battle." Quartz looked grim.

"No herbs in the world can heal some wounds," Lily agreed.

"Or bring the lost back from the dead," Mira added sadly. Lily wrapped her tail around the older she-cat's shoulders.

"You mean the father of your kits?" Mothpelt asked after a moment. The alley she-cats looked at the medic incredulously.

"Forgive me, I know it's a sensitive subject. It's just that Crisp and Oats... Seeing Crisp throw herself after her littermate during the battle..." Mothpelt turned her eyes to Cinderblossom and Sprucetail.

"That's how Lionmask saved Nightchaser, allegedly," Sprucetail finished for her.

Cinderblossom shifted her paws uncomfortably. "The father of your kits... He wasn't a Clan cat, was he?"

Mira gave the most imperceptible of nods.

"He was going to come back to you," Mothpelt breathed. "He confided in me once he was sure I was a rebel as well. Told me he knew of a place we could go if the rebellion failed. He meant here." She looked around Tumble-Down Den as if seeing it anew.

"Lionmask was a great warrior," Sprucetail said, bowing her head

in remembrance. "I'm sorry he didn't make it out."

Mira shot to her paws. "One more thing to thank Nightchaser for," she said bitterly. The she-cats, and Dewpaw with his prying eyes, watched her disappear into the night.

"It's always been a sensitive subject for her," Lily said quietly. "She told me about him once, when they first met. I assumed the kits were his."

"All those scouting missions," Sprucetail said, a note of amusement in her voice, "he wasn't scouting at all. He was visiting Mira. He really had Dawnstar wrapped around his tail, didn't he?"

Quiet purrs of amusement floated into the night, fading quickly.

"This Dawnstar," Roxanne began, "is she really as terrible as you say she is?"

"Worse," Cinderblossom said with a shiver. "If I could I would never go back there."

The alley she-cats exchanged looks. "Then why go at all?" Lily asked quietly. "Why not stay here?"

This time, the rebel she-cats looked at each other, as if deciding whether to divulge precious information.

"Mothpelt is visited in her dreams by our ancestors," Sprucetail said hesitantly. "It is part of being a healer that you receive messages from StarClan who, up until a couple of moons before the rebellion, had been silent."

"In my dreams I am visited by Sootstar and Finchwatcher, the leader and medicine cat of MoorClan at the time of Heatherfur's rebellion," Mothpelt explained. "They were the two cats who guided Nightchaser at the time of our own rebellion, but we timed it poorly and failed."

Dewpaw could feel his eyes growing wider the longer he listened. The names coming out of Mothpelt's mouth meant nothing to him, yet the gathered she-cats all seemed to know what they meant. He

looked up at the stars, narrowing his eyes in search of cats high above.

"DarkClan will fall on the darkest of nights, that's what the prophecy says," Mothpelt continued. "And, after that, the three Clans of old will be restored. SeaClan on the cliffs, RockClan in the forest, and MoorClan in the fields, sharing High Stones as their meeting place of peace every moon and Moonwaters as their meeting place with StarClan."

The icy leaf bare wind whistled through the trees, the only sound for a long time. Dewpaw shifted, paws growing cold and cramped.

"Do you think peace is possible?" The question seemed to come from all of them.

"I don't know," Mothpelt admitted.

"But, if it is, wouldn't you want to try?" Sprucetail said.

// I'm once again sorry for my extended absence. Lots of things going on - I was in the hospital for a while and couldn't get down to writing for a while after that - but I won't bore you with that. Point is, I've finally finished this chapter and, while I can't promise scheduled updates, I can promise you sporadic ones. Happy to be back!

// chapter 20 //

Lightpaw emerged from the healer's den shaken, but the second she stepped out into the open she found herself swept up by the other apprentices. An electric energy hung in the air, one that should have swept her up. Yet, all she felt was fear, rolling off of her in waves.

"DarkClan, gather around," Dawnstar crowed from the Speaking Rock and, numbly, Lightpaw felt her paw moving towards the centre of the camp. Beside her Stormpaw practically vibrated with excitement.

Morningfire. The name took up every corner of her mind. Her own father had not recognized her in his feverish state, he'd thought she was someone else. And now, judging from the gathered Clan, she might never see him again if the greencough grew any worse.

"We're gathered today to see off our four apprentices on their final assessment," Dawnstar said somewhere off in the distance, and Lightpaw vaguely realized that she might never see Yewpaw again either.

"Our sources in Twolegplace have reported sightings of rebel activity and we are wary of an attack," the DarkClan leader continued. She looked absolutely imperious sitting atop the Speaking Rock, even with Spiderthorn missing from her side. In fact, she looked more royal than Lightpaw had ever seen her.

Dawnstar leapt down from the rock, beckoning the apprentices closer. Beetlepaw hissed, startling a dazed Lightpaw forward. She felt Dawnstar's eyes travel over her, taking in her frazzled state.

"Stormpaw and Rainpaw," the leader said, redirecting her gaze to the two grey apprentices. "You will travel to the Crowfood Place within the Twolegplace. It lies over a small bridge and is made up of mountains of crowfood. There, you will find the Junkyard Gang

and it is your mission to convince them to join us."

The two grey apprentices exchanged incredulous looks but accepted their mission with a nod.

The unease in Lightpaw's stomach grew; only she and Beetlepaw were left. If the other two had been paired...

"Beetlepaw, Lightpaw. You are to infiltrate the ranks of the alley cats, who are hiding the rebels. Your assessment will depend on the information you are able to gather, and how many you are able to kill."

Lightpaw's blood turned cold. She looked over at Beetlepaw, hoping to see the same reaction, but saw only blood lust in her littermate's eyes, a determination to do anything it took to become a full member of DarkClan.

"You will set out at nightfall," Dawnstar decided. Above, the sun had painted the sky in hues of marigold and lavender; nightfall was not far off.

Lightpaw's first instinct was to run, as fast and far away as her legs would allow. But to what end? DarkClan would hunt her down, too, and end her like they wanted to end the rebels.

"Lightpaw?" She looked up to meet worried copper eyes.

"I brought you your travelling herbs," Reedpaw explained. "They might taste a little bitter, I'd recommend sharing a mouse with Beetlepaw before you head out to get rid of the taste. They'll help you travel further without needing to stop to hunt."

Lightpaw nodded mutely, dismissing the tom. He did not move.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Of everyone in DarkClan, Reedpaw would have understood her hesitation.

"It's just so surreal," Lightpaw said instead.

Reedpaw twitched his whiskers. "You'll be back in no time," he assured. "I'll be here waiting for you." He touched his nose to hers and she breathed him in, willing herself to remember the scent of lavender and mint. Some semblance of relief filled Lightpaw and she flicked her tail over his shoulder as he moved off to deliver travelling herbs to Stormpaw. She lapped the herbs up quickly, scrunching her nose up at the bitter taste. She would definitely take Reedpaw up on the advice about the mouse.

As she headed to the freshkill pile, Flamestrike ran past her, looking incredibly distracted.

"Flamestrike, any tips for my assessment?" she asked, stopping him in his tracks.

"Don't get killed," he purred, though his eyes continued darting around the camp. "Keep your wits about you, some of those rebels might be able to see right through you. Make sure you and your partner know what the other is doing at all times - you want your stories to line up."

Lightpaw snorted. "That last one will be impossible."

Flamestrike stilled, looking straight at her. Finally, with something like regret in his eyes, he said, "Try to work together. It may feel impossible but put your differences aside. If something goes wrong this could be the last time you see each other, and you will forever be left wondering how things might have been had you tried harder."

When the tom blinked the far-off look was gone and his eyes again darted distractedly around the camp. "Good luck. I need to find Reedpaw; Dapplefrost is having pains in her stomach and I'm worried."

"Goodbye," Lightpaw said as her mentor dashed away, flicking his tail farewell. Watching him go, Lightpaw vowed to use everything he had taught her to get through her assessment alive.

The sun was a half-circle on the horizon, the sky falling into a deep blue. Soon, she would have only Beetlepaw for company and a

long road ahead - a lot of time to think about her parting with Spiderthorn. She padded over to the abandoned log den at the edge of camp and leapt atop it to await nightfall.

"Strategizing already?" Shademask's voice held a note of amusement as he joined her moments later.

Lightpaw inclined her head. "Not exactly. Just waiting."

"Your assessment will be a lot more dangerous than mine ever was," he said. "Are you looking forward to it or dreading it?"

The she-cat glanced sideways at him, wondering if his question were a trap. Shademask had never given her any reason not to trust him but his very name – mask – made her pause.

"I'm looking forward to using my skills," she replied carefully. "But dreading the thought that I may not make it back." She let her eyes wander over the cats of DarkClan. Skunknose was attempting to organize a midnight patrol amongst the mingling group and she caught sight of Reedpaw weaving his way over to Stormpaw and Rainpaw to deliver the last of the travelling herbs.

"That's the thought that worries me too," Shademask said, his eyes on her. She met them with her own for a brief moment before she heard Beetlepaw calling her name impatiently from the camp entrance.

"I – better go," Lightpaw breathed out.

Shademask nodded. "You'll be missed on border patrols."

When Lightpaw glanced back one last time from the camp entrance, his lone figure remained atop the abandoned log.

//

"I'm hungry," Beetlepaw groaned as they padded through the fields. They had travelled throughout the night to reach the Twolegplace and, upon arriving at its wooden walls, decided to travel west along it. If they found unfamiliar scents they would climb over and follow. Dawn had come and gone and the sun hung

high above; they'd had no luck so far.

"Then go hunt," Lightpaw replied, her own stomach grumbling. So far, the two had remained relatively silent, leaving Lightpaw to her whirling thoughts.

Beetlepaw rolled her eyes. "In this snow?" She had a point, as the snow drifts reached their shoulders in some places on the open plains. They were higher near the walls of Twolegplace and sloped down before rising again. The two she-cats found the shallowest paths where possible but had climbed through drifts twice their size already.

Lightpaw sighed. "Let's cross the wall. Maybe there will be prey there."

Beetlepaw scrunched up her nose.

"Do you have a better idea?" Lightpaw asked her exasperatedly.

After some consideration Beetlepaw shook her head. In one quick bound she was atop the fence, Lightpaw right behind her. Her muscles ached as she pulled herself up.

"I never knew it looked like this from up here," Beetlepaw breathed, gazing out over Twolegplace. Twoleg dens rose up before them, grey and brown giants. Black Thunderpaths weaved around them, monsters shining like beetles as they roared along them.

Lightpaw turned to look at where they'd come from. A thin path, snaking through the snow-covered fields, back to the just visible points of High Rocks.

"You coming?" Beetlepaw's voice came from below.

Try to work together.

"Coming." Together, they took their first steps into Twolegplace.

//

They took refuge in an alley the first night, making a meal of the

rats they found there. The second they slept in a small grove between Twoleg dens where an unfortunate mouse became their meal. The third night they went hungry, sleeping in a tree they found behind a Twoleg den.

The further they travelled, the more the air smelled of smoke and any hope Lightpaw had of finding other cats waned. By the fourth night her paws ached from walking along the hard paths of Twolegplace and her heart still had not slowed after their mad dash to get away from a Twoleg.

"You take first watch tonight," Beetlepaw said. "I'm exhausted."

"I'm tired too, you know," Lightpaw replied, feeling a twang of irritation.

"But you're not *exhausted*," Beetlepaw pointed out, yawning wide to prove her point.

Lightpaw's claws pricked but she kept them sheathed. "We have to find a place to rest first. We need to hunt too."

"I'll hunt if you take first watch," Beetlepaw offered.

"I'd rather hunt on my own, thanks." Her tone was clipped.

Beetlepaw shrugged. "Sounds like you'll be going hungry again."

The jab at her lack of stealth made Lightpaw angry. "And you'll soon be short a partner. Wonder how much of a DarkClan hero you'll be when you return without anything."

"Oh, so you think you're better off without me?" The black she-cat narrowed her eyes. "Because I know for a fact I'd be better off without you."

"Fine." Lightpaw increased her speed, jumping the nearest fence. She landed in a small Twoleg greenspace, empty save for a curious scent. The she-cat sniffed the air, trying to place the smell.

Suddenly, a yapping broke the air and a bundle of white fur rushed towards her. With a yowl, Lightpaw retreated.

"Welcome back," Beetlepaw said drily.

Lightpaw glared.

"He's harmless, you know." Both she-cats jumped, startled by the voice. It came from the fence Lightpaw had just jumped, upon which sat a fat brown tabby. "Just a little pup."

"Charlie," Lightpaw said, recognizing him. Beetlepaw's fur was sticking out, making her look twice her size.

"You know this kittypet." The disgust in Beetlepaw's voice was evident.

Charlie's lip curled, own fur rising.

"Don't mind her," Lightpaw interjected. "She's usually prickly."

The kittypet stopped baring his fangs but his fur did not lie flat. "You look lost."

Lightpaw chanced a sideways glance at Beetlepaw. As much as her littermate would hate asking the help of a kittypet, Charlie could provide them with freshkill and shelter.

"Our Clan cast us out," Lightpaw said, shuffling her paws. "We were seen as too weak for refusing to take part in a kill and they threatened to kill us too. We managed to escape."

Charlie looked them over. "You don't look injured at all." He looked at Beetlepaw distrustingly.

The cream and blue apprentice nodded, thinking fast. "We... escaped in the night. Our guard had fallen asleep. We thought they might follow our scent so we've been wandering through Twolegplace for the last three nights trying to lose them."

"You still smell of Clan, but the Twolegplace has done quite a bit of work," Charlie acknowledged, leaping down from the fence. He kept his distance from Beetlepaw. "Are you looking to stay here?" His gaze bored into them and Lightpaw shifted uncomfortably. Beetlepaw stayed her ground.

"Perhaps," Lightpaw said. "For now, just shelter and freshkill would be great." As if on cue, their stomachs growled.

Charlie glanced at Beetlepaw one last time and Lightpaw mentally willed her littermate to stop her aggressive act. To her surprise, the she-cat stopped bristling, though her claws remained unsheathed.

"Well, I'm sure there's no harm in having you stay with us for a night," Charlie said. "Come this way."

The she-cats gladly followed him through the maze of wooden walls.

// Thank goodness for roadtrips, they make writing so much easier! So here's a new chapter for you guys.

// chapter 21 //

Cold days turned into even colder nights and Dewpaw's routine continued. Train, hunt, eat, sleep; and so the days passed. Interspersed were thoughts of what he'd heard from the gathered she-cats and the observations he made as he went about his day. Nightchaser truly seemed on edge but, truthfully, when had he not?

The others carried on as they always had. Sprucetail retained her air of authority but contributed to patrols just as anyone else did. Quartz continued training her charges, though with a renewed vigour. Mira hunted, Lily sorted. Mothpelt came and went, usually with leafy greens in her jaws.

Only Cinderblossom seemed different. Watching her from his spot near the Tumble-Down Den a few nights later, Dewpaw noticed she walked with a heaviness in her step, head down. She seemed much older, or as though she carried the weight of the world on her shoulders. Curiously, her few brighter moments took place around Killian, who the others continued to distrust. Dewpaw did not think much of it; he liked Killian well enough.

There were others Dewpaw had grown decidedly distasteful of. With Quartz's new training regimen more rigorous than ever, Hazel, Finch, and Soren grew increasingly harder to stomach. Webpaw's competitive nature resurfaced and every time Dewpaw lost to her he ached for days.

Despite this, Dewpaw knew the training was working. Already, he felt more confident in his fighting techniques and even more so in his hunting. Every night, he fell into his nest with the knowledge that he'd worked harder than the day before.

"Dewpaw, who have you not yet fought?" Quartz barked. Before her, a bruised Oats was getting to his paws, Crisp prancing away happily from their mock fight. Dewpaw paused a moment before deciding.

"Hazel."

The brown she-cat smirked. "That's because you don't even have a chance of beating me."

A moon prior, Dewpaw might have agreed with her. Now, he gritted his teeth against a barbed retort.

The two took up their positions, Hazel gracefully sliding into a crouch and Dewpaw lowering himself, his leg sticking out awkwardly behind him. Hazel began to circle but the tom held his position firmly, watching her every move.

When she attacked him she was quick, a front paw strike right to the face. Dewpaw dropped to the ground, propelling himself forward with his hind paw and smashing into Hazel's front paws. The she-cat hissed, jumping back. Dewpaw straightened.

"Weren't expecting that, were you?" He was quite proud of himself for his strategy.

Hazel narrowed her eyes. "You're crowfood."

She leapt, turning mid-air to protect her stomach and slashing with the back paws. Dewpaw felt her blows connect with his back and growled deep in his throat. Turning as quickly as he could, he swept his body in a full circle, wiping Hazel's paws right out from underneath her with the deadweight that was his back leg. She fell to the ground with a surprised yelp.

"Well done!" Quartz's voice came from somewhere near him but Dewpaw hardly took notice. He turned to face his opponent and leapt.

Too late he realized his mistake. His back leg weighed him down and his leap was not high enough to clear Hazel. She reared up, coming back down right over him and trapping him under her weight. If this were a real battle, Dewpaw knew, she would be shredding his back and sides to bits.

"Hazel wins," Jaystrike decided, stepping forward to observe the two fighters. Dewpaw gave a huff, but Hazel did not let him up.

"Though you did a very good job today Dewpaw," Quartz praised. "Better than you ever have." A small cough escaped her before she told Hazel to get up. The trainee half-heartedly obeyed.

Dewpaw's own cough rang out around their training clearing as he climbed to his paws. "Thanks," he breathed.

"Good strategy," Crisp said, settling down beside him with some freshkill that night. "I like how you just made her crumble with a swipe of your back leg. She demonstrated, taking Oats unawares. Her littermate fell on his face, freshkill still gripped in her jaws.

"I'm gonna get you back for that," the cream tom muttered, taking a place on the other side of Dewpaw.

Dewpaw purred over his own mouse. Though it was small it would fill him and, besides, he was in much too good a mood to think about how hungry he was. Suddenly, he seemed quite popular.

"It's too bad Hazel got you in the end," Robin said, coming to join them. "You were doing really well."

"My jump was too weak," Dewpaw said. "I only really have one leg to jump with."

Crisp nodded, looking him over. "You could always practice climbing and jumping to make it stronger?"

"I can help!" Oats said excitedly. He was one of the most agile trainees.

Dewpaw nodded, eager to spend time training. The more he trained, the stronger and more confident he became. He held his head high, even against the resenting gazes of Hazel, Finch, and Soren, who sat on the opposite side of camp with their own freshkill. Olive and Webpaw watched the exchange curiously.

A fit of coughing overtook the tom just as Crowpaw padded up to join the small group.

"Are you alright?" Robin asked, concern in her voice. Beside her,

Crowpaw had a strange look on his face.

"Of course," Dewpaw rasped, another cough coming out. "Just a chill, or I may have just swallowed a bone."

Robin looked at him skeptically. Crowpaw looked him over once more before beginning his meal.

"I wouldn't worry about it," the black tom said, voice muffled by the freshkill in his jaws. So Dewpaw didn't.

//

The snow reached up to nearly past his shoulders but the grey tom pressed on. Powdery and soft, it slid around him like water. His paw steps were as quiet as possible, yet he was still keenly aware of the dragging of his back leg.

The little lake where he'd first caught a blackbird was eerily silent in the leafbare morning. Dewpaw kept himself from sighing, reminding himself that every little noise might ruin his chances of a catch.

He crept up on a vole unawares; something was throwing off his scent lately. Stifling a cough, he crouched. The vole, too preoccupied with perhaps its own first morsel in days, did not notice him.

Dewpaw lifted his back leg just a whiskerlength off the ground to ensure it didn't drag. Bunching his good paws beneath him, he prepared to pounce. As he rose, however, the cough burst out of him and the vole, frightened, scurried away.

"Mousedung," Dewpaw cursed as another fit of coughing overtook him. This one lasted longer than the previous ones had and left him wheezing. He briefly thought about going to Mothpelt but quickly decided against.

He shook out his fur, prepared to continue his hunt. Though his chest felt constricted, his empty stomach felt more important.

The next shrew he happened upon nearly escaped him. As it

moved to scurry away, Dewpaw leaped after it, driving his damaged leg into the ground and pushing himself as far as possible. He landed on top of it unceremoniously but made quick work of delivering a killing bite.

"Good catch." The voice startled Dewpaw and he lowered himself defensively.

"Relax, it's just me." Crowpaw appeared from amongst the snow drifts, a small green plant in his jaws.

"Helping out the medics?" Dewpaw asked, burying the shrew quickly.

Crowpaw tilted his head. "Not exactly." He dropped the green herb at Dewpaw's feet. "Eat it."

Dewpaw wrinkled his nose. He hated herbs. But when he lowered his head to sniff it, he found a delightful scent. His mouth watered.

A tell-tale constriction in his chest made him back away as another bout of coughing hit him.

"Why do I need to eat it?" Dewpaw asked, coughing all the while.

The older tom flicked his tail at him. "That's why. I don't think that cough is going to go away on its own, and you don't seem particularly fond of Mothpelt or Lily."

Dewpaw scowled but said nothing. He lapped up the herb, revelling in its sweet taste.

"If all herbs tasted like this, being sick wouldn't be so bad," Dewpaw said, swiping his tongue over his jaws.

This time, it was Crowpaw who scowled. "Greencough is very serious and spreads easily. You're lucky you haven't infected anyone with it." The black tom disappeared into the snow drifts with a whisk of his tail, leaving Dewpaw properly ashamed.

//

In the following days, Dewpaw realized Crowpaw had been right. First, he noticed Quartz holding back her coughing during training. Then, Fiero returned from a long hunt coughing without pause. Finch and Olive began coughing during mock battles. Condor and Birchfrost, who often shared prey together, were now lying together in the medic's den. Mothpelt and Lily rushed about, both inside the camp and all over the Twolegplace, looking for the herb Crowpaw had brought Dewpaw. The medic's den was off limits to everyone but the sick and the two she-cats who were their caretakers.

With Quartz, Olive, and Finch gone from training, Beaver and Jaystrike began sharing the responsibility. Dewpaw found himself under the care of Jaystrike, along with Crowpaw, Robin, and Hazel.

"Today we'll practice partner sparring," Jaystrike decided, pairing them up. Dewpaw faced Robin, twitching his whiskers with amusement. He was glad Jaystrike had not paired him with Hazel.

"If you get three hits you win," the grey tom continued. "Aim for the face, chest, and legs." Beside him, Roxanne nodded, overseeing the training.

"Let's see what you can do," she said, flicking her tail.

Dewpaw lunged forward, stretching out his paw to hit Robin across the face. She dodged underneath, swiping her own at Dewpaw's chest. He felt the tip of it skim across his fur before he could retreat.

"One," she said. Then she moved again.

This time, Dewpaw was prepared. He ducked, her paw going over his head, and scurried forward, taking Robin's paws out from underneath her.

"One," he breathed out, scrambling out of her reach.

Robin got to her paws quickly, a little shaken. In the moment it took her to gather her thoughts, Dewpaw rushed her again. This time, his paw connected with the right side of her face.

"Two!" he crowed.

Robin's face turned into a mask of determination. With one swift movement she leaped over him and before Dewpaw could turn he felt her paws rake his back.

"Two." The mask of determination remained. Whoever made the last blow would win.

But before they could continue their training, both became aware that neither Jaystrike nor Roxanne were watching. Confused, Dewpaw looked over at the other pair.

Hazel had Crowpaw pinned to the ground and the black tom lay whimpering beneath her.

"Fight back!" Jaystrike yelled at the trainee, tail lashing angrily. "Don't just lay there! You know DarkClan wouldn't even take a second look at you before slicing your throat open."

Crowpaw only shook his head, showing no will to fight back.

"I haven't trained you for ten moons for you to just give up like this," Jaystrike hissed. "So you *will* get up and you *will* fight." His words were slow and angry.

Still, Crowpaw did not move.

"Let's head back to camp," Roxanne suggested quietly, placing a gentle tail on Jaystrike's shoulders. The tom brushed her away.

"No. I'm not going to stand here and watch Crowpaw refuse to fight."

"Then don't." Roxanne met the tom's eyes and Dewpaw could see she was challenging him. A few heartbeats later, with one last look at Crowpaw, Jaystrike took off in the direction of camp.

"Training's over," Roxanne decided, surveying them. "I expect you all to hunt before you return to camp." With a whisk of her tail she, too, was gone.

//

Dewpaw returned to camp with a measly shrew. Underneath a lavender sky, the camp seemed peaceful but he knew, a moment after stepping foot in it, that it was anything but. Jaystrike's shoulder were still tense; Roxanne watched the tom diligently, her own muscles tensing whenever he got too near Crowpaw. The black trainee avoided eye contact with anyone nearby and sat hunched over, staring at his paws.

Dewpaw thought it strange that the black tom who he always viewed as an older littermate and mentor of sorts suddenly had no interest in fighting. Why would any cat who had the privilege to learn how to fight not want to? There were so many great cats to look up to – Condor, Bronco, Sprucetail, even Killian.

Killian, who was once again sharing his prey with Cinderblossom. Dewpaw narrowed his eyes. If she didn't want her kit, perhaps she might want a loner instead.

About to look away, a curious flash of black and white caught Dewpaw's eye. He looked up just in time to see Gannet draw Killian away, the two toms disappearing into a bushy area of the camp. Without hesitation, Dewpaw followed.

"Do you think it's true?" The raspy whisper belonged to Gannet.

"I don't know for sure," Killian replied. "But the ex-Clan cats seem to believe so. Nightchaser grows more and more agitated the longer they wait."

"Do you think they can be defeated?" From his position behind a tangle of branches, Dewpaw saw something glint in Gannet's eyes.

"I've seen them fight and based on the skill I've seen here..." Killian paused. "It'll be an unlikely win."

Dewpaw's eyes widened.

After some thought, Gannet replied. "We'll join them. Even out the odds."

"That is all I ever asked for," Killian said, mouth stretched wide in a grin.

// I'm finding a lot of enjoyment in writing lately so here's another chapter! I'm really hoping this burst of inspiration lasts until the end of this novel.

// chapter 22 //

Charlie led them deeper and deeper into Twolegplace until Lightpaw lost all sense of direction and Beetlepaw complained about her aching paws.

"Quit your whining," an irritated Charlie quipped back at her. "We're almost there."

The den he led them to was small and low to the ground, the surrounding area covered in giant drifts of snow. Lightpaw stared up at its dark openings, the light of the moon glinting off of the surfaces there.

Charlie did not lead them to one of these openings, however. He snaked through the snowdrifts and made his way to a tall opening near the ground. With one neat jump, he landed on the ledge just outside it. Without a backwards glance, he disappeared inside.

Beetlepaw followed without hesitation, paws clearly too tired for her to give a second thought as to where she was going. Lightpaw took her time, balancing on the ledge and swiping at the opening with a paw. There was nothing there.

Within, the Twoleg den was warm and the material under her paws soft. She found herself standing on a floor of leaves but, to her astonishment, none of them moved or rustled underpaw as she walked over them. Thoroughly frightened, Lightpaw dashed off after Charlie.

He led them up a tall incline, the she-cats scrambling up each small ledge after him. Finally, they reached a flat landing. The room Charlie led them into was dark, only the fragmented light of the moon entering it. Lightpaw again noticed the strange glint of the den openings but had no chance to investigate before a new scent hit her.

"Who have you brought?" The grey she-cat had dark stripes and

looked at the she-cats with narrowed eyes.

"Two she-cats who have been run out from DarkClan," Charlie explained. "This is the one I've met and told you about." He flicked his tail at Lightpaw lazily.

"Ah." Her tone was clipped and her eyes flashed dangerously. "Can we trust you?"

Lightpaw and Beetlepaw exchanged a look.

"Please, we just need a place to stay for the night," Beetlepaw explained, sounding completely unlike herself. "Tomorrow we'll head out. We heard there are rebels hiding somewhere in the Twolegplace and want to join them."

The lie came out fluidly and Lightpaw could only marvel at Beetlepaw's bravery. The grey she-cat, though clearly not completely convinced from the looks of her still unsheathed claws, nodded her head.

"I'm Minerva," she said. "You two can sleep in that bed there." Lightpaw looked over to see a soft-looking nest of strange-looking materials.

"Thank you," she remembered to say before following Beetlepaw over to their nest for the night. As soon as she fell into it, she realized just how much her muscles ached and how she hadn't had a good night's rest in too long. Perhaps tonight she finally would.

//

The silence pressed in on her and her breath came out in short gasps. Her paws ached but she continued to run, pushing herself forward. Her heart raced – but for what reason? All she knew was that it pounded, an erratic beat that filled her with fear and adrenaline.

She came to an abrupt stop before a cliff face and her ears pinned themselves to her skull. She looked left, then right. There was nowhere to go. But what was she running from? She turned, unsheathing her claws, ready to face it.

All of a sudden the breath rushed out of her. His golden eyes pierced into her, starlight against his coat of pitch black. He was lithe, smaller than most of the toms she knew. And the white rims around his eyes made him all the more striking.

"Nightchaser," she breathed.

"Always chasing the dark," he replied, voice far-off. He tilted his head to the side. "What are you chasing? What is it that you seek?"

She paused for a moment. "I seek the rebels."

He remained motionless. "Is it?"

She reconsidered her answer. "Yes."

Again, he said, "Is it truly?"

This time she thought for longer. Her mission, the only way she would be accepted into DarkClan as a full warrior, was to find and kill the rebels, or else learn as much information as possible and report back.

She squared her shoulders. "Yes, it is," she said with finality.

A cruel grin curled itself onto his features. "No. That is not what you seek at all."

And he pounced, claws flashing.

Lightpaw woke with a start, the Twoleg room coming into focus through her haze. Beetlepaw's unimpressed face peered down at her from above.

"Are you done thrashing?" her littermate asked, smoothing down a tuft of fur on her chest. "I'm going to have to kick you out of the nest if you're not."

Lightpaw apologized with a dip of her head. Evidently, tonight would not be a night where she slept peacefully.

A loud knocking outside caused them both to jump. Peering up,

Lightpaw saw a fluffy white cat outlined in one of the den openings. Her paws scraped at whatever invisible barrier sat there, a small white and grey kit at her side following suit.

A sleepy Charlie moved up to them, Minerva right behind him, and Lightpaw watched in amazement as the invisible barrier disappeared with an upward push of first their paws, then their bodies.

The outside cold invaded the space quickly, making Lightpaw shiver. The two fluffy cats landed on the floor. Both smelled of fear; the larger one had claw marks on her shoulders and sides.

"Pearl, what's wrong?" Minerva asked immediately.

The white she-cat was out of breath. "They – they – threatened..."

The little kit piped up instead. "There's someone chasing us!"

Charlie and Minerva exchanged alarmed looks. Then, they simultaneously turned to Lightpaw and Beetlepaw.

"You did this," Minerva screeched, throwing herself at Beetlepaw. The black apprentice dodged without much effort.

"We did nothing of the sort," she hissed through her teeth, fur sticking straight up.

Pearl found her voice. "Two cats. One tom, black as night. The other a she-cat with silver fur."

Lightpaw's first thought was that of her dream.

"It's not Nightchaser, is it?"

"Night who?" Pearl asked, face blank. But Charlie and Minerva had rounded on the apprentices once more.

"What do you know of Nightchaser?" Minerva growled.

Lightpaw took a step back. "Only that he leads the rebels. He used to tell us stories when we were still kits, stories that went

against DarkClan's rules."

"Is that why you're searching for him?" The grey she-cat's eyes narrowed. "To kill him?"

"No, to join him!" Lightpaw cried. "DarkClan cast us out, we want nothing to do with them." The lies slipped out with so much ease that Lightpaw was unsure of their truth.

"Minerva, enough," Charlie said. Turning to Pearl, he asked, "What did these cats want from you?"

Pearl's blue eyes had grown wide. "Information. About DarkClan. About the rebels." Her fluffy tail whisked in Lightpaw's direction.

The wind howled through the den opening. As if realizing for the first time that it was still open, Charlie leapt up to it. Instead, he was bowled over by a jet black shape.

"Charlie!" Minerva screeched, throwing herself at the black tom. She hit him with enough force to throw him against a wall.

"Tell us what you know of DarkClan." The voice was soft but authoritative and Lightpaw felt chills down her spine; it sounded like Dawnstar. But when she looked up she saw glossy silver fur and a feathery tail wrapped neatly over a round belly.

"What purpose does this serve you?" Charlie asked, getting to his paws. Pearl and her kit hid behind him, shivering.

The jet black tom paced forward. He looked hard and mean, scars criss-crossing his pelt.

"They took everything from us, that idiot Nightchaser and his rebels, just to get their revenge on this DarkClan. The Marked is what the rest of us call them. And everyone knows they can't be defeated."

"The rebels threatened to kill us if we didn't join their cause," the silver she-cat continued. "They took the gang from us. Now, DarkClan is our only hope for revenge."

Lightpaw shivered. She knew exactly what Dawnstar would do to these cats if they trespassed on DarkClan territory.

No one moved a muscle. No one said a word.

"If you don't volunteer information, I will take it by force," the black tom hissed, unsheathing his claws. Still, no one breathed.

With a growl, the tom leaped and Lightpaw, realizing she was his closest target, fell onto her back beneath his weight. Her own claws slid out, but not quickly enough. She felt a piercing pain in her shoulder.

"Tell me what you know," he hissed.

"Where are the rebels," she countered.

The pain in her shoulder increased as his claws dug in deeper. Somewhere off to the side she could hear the others fighting the she-cat.

"The rebels are with the alley cats. Now, it's your turn to tell me where to find the Marked and how to help them destroy the rebels."

"They won't let you," Lightpaw said. "They will kill you the second you step foot on their territory."

His eyes flashed dangerously. "You're getting in the way of my revenge."

Lightpaw struggled against him. "I'm only telling you the truth."

Still, the claws sank deeper. Now, his fangs drew closer too.

"The rebels *will* fall." He snapped his teeth, his rank breath stirring her whiskers.

With a great lurch, his weight suddenly disappeared. Staggering to her paws, she now saw him bearing down upon another black shape – Beetlepaw. He moved with the intent to kill.

Lightpaw yowled, throwing herself after him. Her claws sank into

soft flesh and her world turned into a red haze. She was vaguely aware of her fangs connecting with fur, then skin, then the metallic taste of blood in her mouth. Her jaws felt heavy and warm; then limp and cold.

She stepped back to meet the blank unblinking eyes of the tom she just killed. A chill went through her.

Beetlepaw struggled out from underneath the dead body, eyes wide in terror. Lightpaw had never seen her littermate speechless before.

"Jet!" The silver she-cat sat in the den opening, shock emanating from her. Charlie and Minerva stared up at her from below, licking their wounds.

The she-cat's eyes turned to Lightpaw, whose jaws were still slick with blood. "You'll pay for this," she hissed before disappearing into the night. The pale tortoiseshell stared after her.

The weight of what she had just done had her crumpling to the floor. Charlie rushed forward, picking her up enough to drag her to the nest. Beetlepaw followed numbly behind.

"First kill is always the worst," Charlie mumbled under his breath. Lightpaw hardly heard him. "I would like to believe that will be your last but, with DarkClan possibly tracking you down, I don't think that will be likely."

She nodded mutely, staring at the black tom's limp body.

"Close your eyes," Minerva suggested. "It might help the shock."

Lightpaw did as told, but it did not help. It was a long time before the darkness consumed her and, even then, the taste of blood remained.

// chapter 23 //

Dewpaw tried to put the image of Killian and Gannet out of his mind in the following days by pushing himself even harder during training. With Quartz still sick, Jaystrike and Beaver continued to oversee their progress; Sprucetail and Roxanne stopped by once in a while, fixing a hunter's crouch or frontal attack where they could. Tensions still ran high between Jaystrike and Crowpaw, to the point where the black trainee and Oats had agreed to switch groups.

"Why are the junkyard cats not training with us?" Hazel asked Jaystrike as their training group arrived back in camp. Sure enough, the former members of the Junkyard Gang sat lounging about the premises, licking their fur clean. Only Pixie and Flea were missing from their measly number – both had been forced to move into the medic's den because of greencough. With a slight twist of his stomach, Dewpaw remembered that Cinderblossom had been coughing as well and, at the urging of Killian, had moved into the sick den too.

"They know how to fight, for the most part," Jaystrike replied. "Though not as well as is needed if we are to fight DarkClan." Dewpaw's fur rose slightly. Across the camp, his eyes briefly met Gannet's and he looked away quickly.

"Think I can take you up on that climbing and jumping lesson?" he asked Oats.

The cream tom beamed. "Sprucetail assigned me to a hunting patrol earlier but we can do it right after! Maybe you'd like to come hunting too?"

Dewpaw considered this for a moment but his thoughts were interrupted by an approaching figure.

"More hunters means more freshkill. I think that's a great idea." Killian's shadow fell over the two trainees, Roxanne and Sprucetail on either side.

"I had wanted Cinderblossom to join us but it appears she is ill," Sprucetail confirmed. "You'll make a nice addition to our hunting patrol." They set out without another word.

Dewpaw found himself shadowing Killian, though he made sure to focus on finding prey. Since eating the herbs Crowpaw had given him he found his senses were back to normal, no longer obstructing his ability to hunt. He caught a flightless sparrow and, burying it, continued to follow Killian's scent.

He came upon him as the older tom was burying a small mouse.

"Successful hunting so far?" Killian asked, picking up on Dewpaw's scent.

"Just a sparrow," Dewpaw replied, seating himself in front of the former loner. "How about yours?"

The tabby flicked his tail at the mound. "One mouse. Left a shrew somewhere back there." He spoke nonchalantly and Dewpaw wondered if Killian knew he had overheard him. Drawing a breath, he resolved to ask the tom about DarkClan and if he knew anything.

"I know why you're here," Killian said before Dewpaw could speak.

The grey trainee started. "You do?"

"Of course. I've been spending a lot of time with your mother. You haven't."

Dewpaw cocked his head. "Is that a problem?"

Killian twitched his whiskers in amusement. "I don't know, is it?"

The trainee kept quiet for a moment. "I've been busy with training lately."

"Ah," the tabby replied slowly, a strange glimmer in his eye. "Want to be ready for the big moment, don't we?"

Dewpaw knew he could continue this conversation, let Killian know he'd overheard him and hopefully get some answers about

DarkClan. It would go one of two ways: he would get the answers he sought or the tabby would pounce, unwilling to give up his secrets. But, somehow, words failed him.

"Yeah, we do." His voice sounded faint in his own ears. "Anyway, I should get back to hunting. Wouldn't want to disappoint Sprucetail." Dewpaw bowed out of the clearing, walking backwards towards the nearest bushes.

"No, we really wouldn't want to disappoint Sprucetail." Killian sat and watched him the whole while, that curious gleam still in his eyes.

//

"Really use your forepaws! Don't let yourself slide back!"

Oats' calls reached Dewpaw from below but, try as the grey tom might, he still found himself on the ground heartbeats later. The birch before him was scored with clawmarks and his shoulders screamed from the effort of holding himself up.

"I don't think I can do much more today," Dewpaw breathed out, taking a look at one of his paws. If he wasn't careful, he might wrench a claw.

"One more time!" Oats pleaded. "Last one, I promise."

Dewpaw wanted to claw the cream tom's ears off – did he not understand how hard it was to climb a tree with only three working legs instead of four? – but the younger cat's excitement was infectious. Rolling his shoulders back, the grey trainee prepared to climb the tree.

He had not even climbed a foxlength up the tree when he was once again on the ground.

"Oh well, next time," Oats said with the same excitement. "We should head back anyway, I'm getting hungry and the trainee's get first pick of freshkill tonight!"

Dewpaw's own stomach growled at the thought.

However, the closer they came to the camp the more his appetite waned until, at the camp entrance, he found he was not hungry at all. A heavy gloom hung over the camp, centred around a singular body in the centre of the camp.

"Fiero," Oats said out loud, stopping short. Dewpaw had not had much to do with the alley cat provider, but the sight of his ginger body lying completely still made his heart sink. Next to the dead cat sat a nearly identical one. Leo, his littermate. Webpaw sat beside him, attempting to support him.

"He died around sunhigh." Crowpaw's voice was low but, strangely, untinged with grief. To Dewpaw, it sounded almost too matter-of-fact.

"Fiero," Oats said again, clearly shocked. It was not even dusk yet.

"There will be a vigil tonight," Crowpaw continued, wrapping his tail around the younger tom. "So we can say our goodbyes."

Dewpaw twitched his whiskers sadly. "I hope the greencough doesn't take anyone else."

Crowpaw looked troubled as he replied, "I hope so too. But there isn't enough catmint to go around, especially if more of us get sick."

"Maybe we should clear the camp for now," Dewpaw said to the black tom. "Let those closer to him mourn first." Crowpaw nodded, pushing Oats towards the already gathering alley cats. The cream tom went without protest.

As the two trainees moved away from the vigil, Dewpaw stole glances at Crowpaw out of the corner of his eye. The tom looked exhausted by training and the fighting he continued to be unsuccessful at. The look of worry on Crowpaw's face and the matter-of-factness he possessed in the face of death confused Dewpaw too. And there was the tom's knowledge of herbs to contend with; after all, it could have been Dewpaw lying there had Crowpaw not given him the catmint in secret.

All of a sudden it hit him.

"Crowpaw, why aren't you a medic?"

The black tom stopped in his tracks.

"Think about it," Dewpaw said quickly before Crowpaw could protest. "Your fighting skills are still weak after moons of practice, yet you were able to heal me within a quarter moon."

The light in Crowpaw's golden eyes shifted back and forth, as if warring with itself. He looked uncertain but as if he already knew the answer at the same time.

He took a deep breath. "I had a dream from StarClan. Finchwatcher, a medicine cat of the Old Life told me that that was my destiny."

Dewpaw felt his eyes widen of their own accord. "Have you told anyone?"

Crowpaw shifted uncomfortably. "No. Just you."

"Why not?!" His voice, unintentionally loud, caught the attention of a couple cats nearby.

The black trainee scowled at him. "Because we don't need medics right now. We already have two. What we need are warriors to fight DarkClan."

"Yes, but what's the point of fighting if you're not good at it?" Dewpaw said, only realizing how harsh he sounded when the words were out of his mouth. Crowpaw seemed resigned, however, as if he already knew it was the truth.

"You're right," the tom said, and Dewpaw felt a surge of pride. "But I'm not doing this alone." He gave the younger tom a pointed look.

"You want me to come with you?"

"While I'm sure Mothpelt and Lily will be delighted to have an apprentice, I'm kind of wary of Nightchaser," Crowpaw admitted. Dewpaw shivered. He too was wary of the tom.

"Tomorrow," Crowpaw said decisively. "Once the vigil is over."

Dewpaw nodded in agreement. Already, his friend looked happier, a slight bounce in his step as they returned to the grieving camp. Leo continued to sit next to his deceased littermate, other alley cats surrounding him. Bronco and Roxanne sat across from him, while Soren and Hazel sat on either side of the ginger tom, pressed close for comfort.

Dewpaw padded over, unsure of whether he was welcome to participate. He had not known the tom very well and they had spoken in passing only a couple of times. The trainee pressed his nose to Fiero's cold pelt and closed his eyes, hoping that, wherever he was now, there was no threat of DarkClan looming over him.

No sooner had he walked away from the vigil when a tabby she-cat appeared before him.

"Robin," Dewpaw greeted. He hadn't really spoken to her since their training session, when Jaystrike first blew up at Crowpaw.

"Dewpaw," she acknowledged. Her tone was slightly clipped and Dewpaw cocked his head.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Robin narrowed her eyes. "Why are you so uncaring right now?"

The tom took a step back, confused. "What do you mean?"

"Someone just died of greencough. It's a real danger. And you're parading around like it's no big deal."

"What are you talking about? I just paid my respects to Fiero and was heading over to grab some freshkill."

Robin sniffed, lowering her voice to a low hiss. "That dead body in the centre of camp could be anyone! It could be Cinderblossom. What would you do then? You haven't even spoken to her. Not since she got sick, not for a long while before. Why?"

"That's none of your business," Dewpaw hissed back, resentment boiling in his stomach as he remembered Cinderblossom's words. The idea of saying out loud that she didn't want him made him see

red.

"Well, whatever it is, you should just be thankful that you still have your mother," Robin snarled.

Before she could say anything more, Dewpaw cut her off. "I've had enough of confrontations today." Without even glancing back, he went straight for his nest, ignoring the freshkill pile.

//

He regretted not eating the next morning as he struggled to keep his stomach from growling. He felt very small, even beside Crowpaw who, though older than him, was only slightly larger. The two of them stood before Mothpelt, Lily, Bronco, and Nightchaser. Just behind them sat Beaver and Jaystrike, the latter looking rather agitated.

"No," Jaystrike said immediately after Crowpaw's proposal. "You're throwing away your training."

Nightchaser seemed to agree. "You're over a full season cycle old. By the time you're a full medic it'll be another season cycle at least."

"I already know some things," Crowpaw pointed out, his voice quieter than usual as so many pairs of eyes regarded him. Dewpaw felt like he wanted to sink into the ground beside him.

"There is still much to learn," Mothpelt chimed in. "But I suppose it's doable, if you're willing to learn."

"We need warriors, not medics!" Jaystrike snarled. Mothpelt growled back, clearly offended.

"I had a dream from StarClan," Crowpaw added quietly.

"Who?" Nightchaser's question silenced everyone.

"She called herself Finchwatcher of MoorClan," the trainee replied. He was shaking under their stares now. "She told me I needed to choose to be a medic. And that's what I would like to choose."

Nightchaser's expression had changed significantly. Still, portions of their makeshift jury seemed unconvinced.

Softly, Dewpaw said, "I was supposed to be a medic."

"You have a physical deformity," Jaystrike said rather unkindly, eliciting another snarl from Mothpelt. "Crowpaw doesn't have that to lean on."

Undeterred, Dewpaw continued. "If that was fine then why shouldn't it be fine for Crowpaw? We're just switching places. If I hadn't chosen to become a trainee there would be one less trainee anyways. Who really cares which one of us it is? And, besides, wouldn't a medic be more important in battle? Who is going to take care of all of our injured warriors once this is all over?"

He was met with silence. Watching the faces of their jurors, however, he found his words had struck a chord.

"I accept you as a medic's apprentice," Mothpelt said finally. "And don't you dare say anything about Crowpaw's decision," she hissed at Jaystrike. The grey tom narrowed his eyes but kept his mouth closed.

Everyone cleared out of their leafy meeting place quickly, Mothpelt and Lily congratulating Crowpaw on his new position as they padded by. As Dewpaw turned to leave only Nightchaser remained, still sitting in his original position. He looked removed, as if in a completely different place.

"Wouldn't a medic be more important in battle," the black tom mused. His eyes suddenly snapped to Dewpaw's, almost feverish in their depths. "Injure warriors and it will all be over."

Dewpaw left quickly, his fur not quite flat.

// chapter 24 //

Her dreams were dark and her footsteps heavy. Everywhere she looked there was only that same, impenetrable darkness. She moved through it at as if pushing against a water current, taking one step forward and feeling herself pushed back two. Nothing existed but her and the darkness.

Then, out of nowhere, came a voice, cold as night. "You're one of us now," it said, and a piercing pain hit her shoulders, then her chest, and finally her stomach. She cried out, the pain flames burning her from the inside out.

"No! I'm not one of you!" Her voice echoed around her – *one of you, one of you, one of you.* The darkness, unfaltering, pressed in on her.

When she woke her mouth still tasted of blood.

"Are you done thrashing?" a disgruntled Beetlepaw asked. Yet, her voice was missing its usual bite, kinder than Lightpaw remembered it.

"Have some water," Charlie said, flicking his tail at a round object sitting on the floor.

Despite the heaviness she felt, Lightpaw forced herself to her paws. The body of the tom had been removed from the room but his blood, dark and crusted over, remained. She averted her eyes quickly, bile suddenly hitting her throat. The water did little to remove its taste.

"Some freshkill for you too," Minerva said, eyeing the dead rat between them. "I doubt you've ever had dry food so I took the liberty of hunting it down."

Lightpaw's stomach growled but the thought of eating made her want to retch. She took a tentative bite, motioning for Beetlepaw to

join her. Her littermate dug in without protest.

"Thank you," Lightpaw said, finishing her meal after the third small bite. Her stomach roiled and her chest felt constricted. Beetlepaw echoed her thanks with a mouthful of rat still in her jaws.

"Where are you off to now?" Pearl asked curiously. Her kit slept peacefully, her mother's fluffy tail curled around her.

Lightpaw did not respond right away. She sat numb, unsure of where her paws should be taking her. What was her mission? Her purpose? What things would she have to do in order to fulfill them? She sheathed and unsheathed her claws, the memory of fur and flesh between them all too fresh.

"We need to find the rebels," Beetlepaw replied for her. "They're our only remaining kin now that DarkClan has cast us out."

Charlie and Minerva exchanged a look, as if considering their options. Finally, Minerva heaved a sigh and Charlie practically beamed.

"I can take you as far as the lake where they train and hunt," Charlie said. "But from there you must find your own way."

"That's very kind of you," Beetlepaw purred, finishing off the last of the rat. Lightpaw nodded mutely in agreement, forcing herself to look anywhere but at the blood stains.

"I suppose there's not much use sitting around and waiting," the tabby tom continued. "Perhaps we should be off soon?"

The blood on the floor was too prominent for Lightpaw to look away any longer. The events of the previous night flashed before her eyes – the pain in her shoulders as the tom pinned her down; the fear as she saw him nearing Beetlepaw, ready to kill; the warmth of his blood in her jaws before the cold limpness of his body took over.

"Lightpaw?" Beetlepaw's voice had that harsh ring to it again.

"We should leave as soon as possible," Lightpaw managed to croak out.

"That's what I thought too," Beetlepaw said, her usual smugness ringing through.

//

The Twolegplace seemed endless as the two apprentices followed their tabby guide over wooden walls and through snow drifts. The air had turned colder in the span of a day and Lightpaw found her breath misting before her.

"Leafbare is the worst," Beetlepaw said decidedly. Lightpaw did not have the strength to fight her. She was thankful for the cold pressing against her paws, keeping the memories of warm flesh beneath them at bay.

"It's not so bad in the Twolegplace," Charlie replied, trying to be conversational. "Most of the buildings keep the wind away, and there are many warm places to hide."

"Must be nice," Beetlepaw snarked. The tabby did not deem her comment worthy of a reply.

The sun, though nearly obscured by clouds, was low in the sky by the time they arrived at a wide expanse of land, broken up by a lake and a copse of trees. The water was completely frozen over, the tree branches laden with fresh snow. Lightpaw, so lost in her thoughts on their trek, only now realized there were snowflakes falling around her.

"This is as far as I go," Charlie said. "The trainees come here often, so I have no doubt they've left a trail back to camp. Good luck!" He flicked his tail over Beetlepaw's ears, much to her chagrin, and moved to do so to Lightpaw as well.

Instead, he lay his tail on her back, almost in a fatherly way, and said, "Take care of yourself out there, okay?" The tortoiseshell nodded, meeting his eyes with her own. She hoped he knew how grateful she was for his help.

Beetlepaw wasted no time in scenting out the trainees' trail. Despite the softly falling snow, a large path had been cut through the snowdrifts.

"Stick to the plan," Beetlepaw hissed, moving forward. "DarkClan kicked us out and this is the only place we could go." Lightpaw followed, muttering her agreement.

The black she-cat jumped up onto the wooden wall before them. Looking back at her littermate, she continued, "Oh, and keep up that stricken look. Makes us being run out look very believable."

They did not speak again as they continued along.

As the sun sank ever lower to the horizon, Lightpaw started to shiver. Her paws ached and her mind whirred with never-ending repeats of the previous night. She could hardly stand with the disgust bubbling in her. The she-cat shook her head violently for what seemed like the hundredth time that day, trying to clear the images.

"We're getting closer," Beetlepaw whispered excitedly. Indeed, the scents of the alley cats had grown stronger. Until now, Lightpaw had let her littermate do most of the tracking work.

"Who goes there?" The voice was sharp but, to Lightpaw, strangely familiar. A small black shape appeared out of the thickening snowfall.

"We've come to join the alley cats," Beetlepaw called with authority.

"Well, we'll see about that." The golden eyes settled on Beetlepaw first, then Lightpaw. They widened, their white rims moving up in surprise. Then, they turned to slits.

"What are you doing here?"

Beetlepaw's confidence was gone, her stance lowered and claws unsheathed. Lightpaw fur rose and she copied her sister's defensive position.

"DarkClan ran us out for refusing to kill," Beetlepaw explained. "We didn't know where to go, but knew the rebels would be here. You're our only remaining kin, our only chance of survival."

Nightchaser – so similar to the image Lightpaw had seen in her dream – did not sheathe his claws. "Then why do I smell blood on you?"

Lightpaw glanced down at her paws, which she had neglected to clean in her shocked state.

"We were attacked on our way here," Beetlepaw said, voice wavering. "We had to defend ourselves."

Nightchaser snarled. "You killed someone."

"In self-defense!" Beetlepaw assured him, but the black tom did not move.

"You're one of them." He looked ready to pounce.

"Nightchaser, there you are!" A new dark shape emerged from the snowfall, followed by another. The first had eyes the colour of evergreens; the other indigo blue.

"And who might our guests be?" The green-eyed she-cat looked at the two apprentices expectantly.

"Intruders," hissed Nightchaser. The dark she-cat placed a paw in front of him, as if to keep him from pouncing. She continued to gaze the apprentices.

Lightpaw realized she knew this cat. "Sprucetail?" she asked hesitantly.

The she-cat seemed to relax. "Lightpaw, Beetlepaw. Why are you here?"

"DarkClan ran us out for refusing to kill," Beetlepaw explained again. "We didn't know where to go, but knew the rebels would be here. You're our only remaining kin, our only chance of survival."

"They have blood on them," Nightchaser hissed.

"We were attacked, it was self-defense," Beetlepaw said quickly, keeping her eyes on Sprucetail. Lightpaw looked at the she-cat too, willing her to believe their story.

"They're DarkClan cats," Nightchaser snarled.

Sprucetail laid a tail on his back. "So were we, once." Her voice sounded far away. Somehow, this made Nightchaser's shoulders fall and his claws slid into their sheathes.

"I need to be alone," he said, disappearing before anyone could say another word. Sprucetail watched him go, though Lightpaw kept her eyes on her all the while.

"I apologize for Nightchaser's behaviour," the older she-cat said once the tom was out of ear shot. "He's been increasingly difficult lately." She looked uncomfortable, as if unsure of what to make of the events.

"Let us take them back to camp," Indigo suggested. "Bronco and Roxanne will be curious as to what they know about DarkClan." Sprucetail nodded her agreement.

Lightpaw stepped forward but Beetlepaw held back, hesitant.

"We won't hurt you," Sprucetail assured. "Come, I'm sure you're hungry and aching for a warm, dry nest."

Those were terms not even Beetlepaw could disagree with, and the two apprentices followed the she-cats into the midst of the alley cats.

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After a brief interrogation by Bronco and Roxanne, two tabby littermates who seemed to be the leader and deputy of the alley cats, Sprucetail made good on her promise. Still, Lightpaw felt ill at ease. With the promise of further interrogation tomorrow and the thought of Nightchaser, who was clearly not the Nightchaser she remembered, prowling about, Lightpaw found it hard to fall asleep.

Beetlepaw snored lightly in the nest next to hers.

The longer she stayed awake, the more difficult it was to keep the images of the previous night at bay until, finally, Lightpaw felt she couldn't hold them back any longer. The pain and guilt flooded over her, taking her under until all she saw was darkness. When she opened her eyes again, she was surprised to find the sun rising.

"You really need to stop squirming all night," Beetlepaw huffed, "or I'm going to have to find myself a new nestmate." Lightpaw scowled, but apologized all the same. At the moment, Beetlepaw was all she had.

She got up from her nest which, to her dismay, looked as if a strong wind had blown it apart. She would have to fix it before night fell. For now, she left the shelter of the den Sprucetail had put them in, and stretched in the low rays of the rising sun.

The camp was already busy, with what looked like a patrol preparing to leave. She noticed a grey tom, similar in build to Smoketalon, pacing as he waited. There were scars on his shoulder – the marks of a DarkClan warrior.

Beside him sat a small grey tom, so small Lightpaw wondered if he was just an overgrown kit. His hazel eyes, full of life, briefly met hers and he cocked his head to the side curiously before a cream tom distracted him. Troubled, Lightpaw looked away. For some reason, the small tom looked incredibly familiar.

She chanced another glance as the patrol moved out, having been joined by a large black and white tom and a brown tom with a thick tail. She noticed that only one member of the patrol – the grey tom she had noticed earlier – bore the marks of a DarkClan warrior. The small familiar-looking one limped along with the patrol and Lightpaw realized he had a stunted back leg.

She stared at it in shock. How could an apprentice possibly survive with a deformity? He would never pass his assessments.

"Time for more questions," Beetlepaw said dryly, cutting into Lightpaw's thoughts. Sprucetail was approaching them, tail high in

the air.

"There will be more of us today," Sprucetail said as she lead them to a secluded area of the camp. "Just reply honestly and nothing will happen to you." Beetlepaw and Lightpaw exchanged a meaningful look.

They were sat across from five cats – Bronco, Roxanne, and Sprucetail, who they had met already, and two she-cats, one grey and one white with tortoiseshell splotches.

"You are from DarkClan?" Bronco began.

"Yes," the two she-cats replied in unison.

"Your names are Beetlepaw and Lightpaw?"

"Yes."

"DarkClan cast you out?"

"Yes."

"For what reason?"

"For refusing to kill," Beetlepaw replied.

"And why did you smell of blood when you were found?"

"It was in – "

Bronco raised his tail to silence Beetlepaw and looked intently at Lightpaw. She realized he was waiting for her to answer.

"It was in self-defense," she finally said. "We were attacked on our way here."

"Are there any witnesses to this event?" he asked.

"Charlie and Minerva," Lightpaw said.

"And Pearl and her kit," Beetlepaw added.

"Did you kill this cat in self-defense?" Roxanne continued.

Lightpaw hesitated. Sprucetail had told her to be honest, but surely admitting to killing a cat after being cast out for refusing to do so would look strange. She found the she-cat's eyes, who nodded her support.

"Yes."

"How was it different than what DarkClan asked you to do?"

The space felt suddenly smaller and Lightpaw's chest constricted. She thought back to the tortoiseshell Dawnstar brought into the camp and had the whole Clan butcher, then to the limp black body of Jet.

"D-DarkClan brought in prisoners, cats who h-had done nothing wrong. We refused to b-be part of that." Lightpaw paused to gather her thoughts. "The cat I..."

She trailed off, unable to say it out loud.

Beetlepaw stepped in front of her. "You can't ask this of her. She did it to save me, she – "

Bronco hushed Beetlepaw with his tail once more. "The cat you killed," he prompted.

Killed. I killed him. The metallic taste flooded her mouth, the memory of his blank, staring eyes.

"H-he was on top of me. And, suddenly, he was on top of Beetlepaw, who had knocked him away. A-and I saw him going for her throat, ready to..." That murderous gleam in his eyes, the red haze that filled her in that moment.

"Kill," Bronco supplied.

Lightpaw felt herself trembling.

"He was ready to rip my throat out and Lightpaw threw herself at him and killed him," Beetlepaw snarled. "Are we done here?"

Her voice dripped with menace and even Bronco seemed taken aback.

"I believe so," he said slowly. "You're welcome to stay, especially after your ordeal. You're also welcome to join training with the other trainees, as I assume you never finished your training with DarkClan."

"We'll consider it," Beetlepaw replied, though her tone suggested they would not take anything into consideration. Lightpaw just nodded mutely, throat feeling too tight to speak.

Before Beetlepaw could whisk her littermate away, the grey she-cat and her white and tortoiseshell companion approached.

"I think some chamomile and thyme might do your littermate good," the grey one said to Beetlepaw softly. "She seems to be in quite a bit of shock."

For once, Beetlepaw did not put up a fight.

// TWO CHAPTERS IN ONE WEEKEND?! Well, today I'm thankful for all the readers who have stuck around despite my terrible updates these last couple of months. Happy Canadian Thanksgiving!

// chapter 25 //

The arrival of the two she-cats surprised Dewpaw and he decided very quickly that he didn't like them. The pale tortoiseshell stared at him her first morning in camp and Dewpaw assumed she was judging him for his stunted back leg. The other one, though not directly rude to him, was just loud and seemed bossy, neither of which were characteristics Dewpaw enjoyed in others. As such, he attempted to steer clear of both of them.

He didn't need to worry about the former much, as Mothpelt and Lily had kept her in the medic's den so far. She was separate from those sick with greencough, but the medics had deemed her unfit to join training so far. Dewpaw half-wished the same were true of her littermate, Beetlepaw.

The thought of the medic's den made him half-guilty, as Cinderblossom continued to get more sick with each passing day. Killian had been visiting her less and less but had been strangely close with both Sprucetail and Roxanne ever since Dewpaw followed him during their hunting patrol, though the trainee could not figure out why. Coupled with the fact that he and Gannet were clearly up to something, Dewpaw's trust of the tabby tom waned daily.

As he padded out to join his patrol, he swept his eyes over the camp to see if the former loner was present. He only spotted Gannet and Cobalt arguing over something or other, and Bronco and Sprucetail having a conversation over their freshkill, Bronco's whiskers twitching in amusement over the she-cat's comments.

Condor, feeling better now that his coughing had subsided, stood waiting for the rest of the patrol, Leo at his side. To Dewpaw's surprise, Shard, one of the alley cats, also stood with them.

"Just waiting for Webpaw now," Condor said by way of greeting. Leo huffed in annoyance. Dewpaw was glad to see Leo getting back to his usual self after the death of his littermate.

Webpaw arrived in a flurry of fur, having clearly just gotten out of her nest.

"Sorry I'm late," she said unapologetically, giving her chest one quick lick. It did little to improve her dishevelled appearance.

"You better be," Leo muttered and the she-cat shot him a glare.

"Let's leave the lovers' spat for later, shall we?" Condor intervened, and the two younger cats did not speak again.

As they walked to the edge of the fences, Dewpaw took up his usual position in the middle of the patrol. Condor and Shard walked up ahead of him, the alley cat thanking the second-in-command for allowing him to join the patrol. Condor, in turn, thanked Shard for offering to help in day-to-day happenings at the camp. Dewpaw preferred not to know what Webpaw and Leo were fighting about this time and ignored them to the best of his abilities. For once, his crumpled ears were useful.

The edge of Twolegplace looked more or less the same as when Dewpaw last saw it, though the fields beyond were now covered in sparkling white. The scents rising up from around it were stronger now, too, but Dewpaw found he did not recognize all of them.

"They're marking this border more strongly," Condor commented. "I haven't smelled this much DarkClan stench in a while."

Shard wrinkled his nose. "Do you think they're giving us a warning?"

"One can only hope they do not know of Nightchaser's plans to attack," Condor replied dryly. "Best thing to do is mark our side just as strongly and hope they get the message."

The patrol split off into smaller groups to mark the edge of the territory, and Dewpaw was assigned to Webpaw. They worked silently for the most part, until they reached the final leg of their portion.

"I heard you helped Crowpaw become Mothpelt's apprentice," Webpaw said.

Her neutral tone gave Dewpaw no clue as to how she felt about the development. He shrugged.

"He helped me, I helped him. He didn't belong as a warrior's apprentice."

Webpaw sighed. "No, he didn't. He would have made a truly terrible warrior."

Although Dewpaw half-yearned to tell her off, he had basically told Crowpaw the exact same thing.

"Thank you for helping him," the she-cat said after a moment. "I doubt he would have had the courage to stand up to Jaystrike on his own."

Dewpaw twitched his whiskers. "You're welcome."

Webpaw nodded, a sad expression crossing her face. "Ever since Fiero's death I've been wondering what it would be like to lose my littermate. I can't imagine losing Crowpaw, ever. He's safer now, as a medic's apprentice."

"And a lot more useful," Dewpaw pointed out, marking the last of the border.

Webpaw purred in amusement. "Yes, I suppose he is."

By the time they returned to camp, the other trainees were gathering for a training session. Jaystrike, Beaver, and Roxanne were attempting to divide them into three groups.

"There you are!" Roxanne said as Webpaw and Dewpaw approached. "Webpaw, I want you with Jaystrike. Dewpaw, you're with me. Let's head out!"

Dewpaw fell into step beside Soren and Crisp, the other two members of his training group.

"We'll be doing some more advanced moves today," Roxanne said excitedly. Soren perked up at this, and the ever excited Crisp bounced higher with every step. Behind them, Jaystrike's group –

Hazel, Webpaw, and Oats – and Beaver's group – Finch, recently cleared by the medics, Robin, and Beetlepaw – seemed just as enthused at the prospect of tougher training.

Dewpaw, however, felt a certain dread. He had yet to master the basic moves, especially when it came to balancing his stunted back leg. How would he ever be able to even attempt a more advanced move?

When they arrived in their usual training spot, the snow trampled by multiple sets of paws, the trainees took up their place in a line, Beetlepaw shuffling awkwardly into it. Their mentors set up before them, Jaystrike in the centre and Roxanne and Beaver on either side.

"We'll be working on defending ourselves when you are facing two attackers," Jaystrike announced. "If you're alone and you have one enemy attacking your back and one your front, it's important to keep yourself aware of your surroundings. Always distract or attack your frontal opponent first: they have access to your throat. Like so."

Beaver wasted no time in slashing at Jaystrike's chest, but the grey tom batted his forepaw away quickly. With his other paw, he hit Beaver's face, pushing him aside. He whipped around, facing Roxanne now, and dodged her attack by leaping over her. She rushed forward, hitting a recovering Beaver rather than Jaystrike.

"Nice," breathed Crisp, seated beside Dewpaw. The tom's eyes were wide – how would he ever have the strength in his back legs to jump over an enemy?

They split off into their groups and Dewpaw, unluckily, found himself between Crisp and Soren.

"Rebel versus alley cats," Soren said, squaring his shoulders.

"It's a friendly training practice," Roxanne reminded him with a flick of his ear. The grey bengal looked annoyed.

Dewpaw faced Soren first. He was the larger of the two, so if he

managed to take him out, he would be easily able to leap over Crisp. The tom was about twice his size, however, and had a heavy paw.

The small trainee was not ready for the first swipe and stumbled to the side from the blow. He heard Crisp coming at him from behind and felt her paw narrowly miss his tail. Soren went in for another blow and, this time, Dewpaw met it. The strength behind it still left him unbalanced and, before he knew it, he had fallen over.

"Done!" The victory cry came from Beetlepaw, standing over a very confused Finch and Robin. Beside her, Beaver stood with his mouth open.

"H-how did you do that?" he managed to stammer out.

Beetlepaw puffed up her fur. "I've done it before."

Jaystrike cocked his head. Roxanne stepped forward, looking slightly shaken.

"What other moves have you been taught?" she asked nervously.

The black she-cat shuffled her paws, suddenly looking modest. "Nothing much harder than that. The basics, obviously, and some partner fighting. Maybe leap-and-holds. We were pitted against each other during training a lot."

"And how often did you train?" Jaystrike asked. Dewpaw noticed Beetlepaw's eyes skim over the scars on Jaystrike's shoulder.

"Almost every day," she admitted.

Dewpaw's brows furrowed. It sounded like the DarkClan apprentices far outmatched the rebels and alley cats. If they could hardly fight off their apprentices, what would battle with the warriors look like?

"Let's try it again," Roxanne decided after a pause. "Everyone should get a turn in the middle."

"My turn," Soren announced to their group. He looked

determined to beat Beetlepaw's time.

By the end of the session, only Soren and Webpaw had had any success with the move. Beetlepaw looked rather smug as they walked back to camp. Webpaw, seemingly in awe of the black she-cat, tailed her, asking her questions about her technique. The former DarkClan cat had only been here a few days and already she was acting as if she owned the place.

"She was so fast," Robin told them as the trainees settled down with some freshkill. "She had us both on the ground before we could blink." Dewpaw glanced over at Finch, sitting on his own a couple tail-lengths away. He looked rather dejected. Further off, Hazel glared at Webpaw and Beetlepaw, who were sitting near the medic's den.

"The rest of us need to practice," Oats said, sounding sure of himself.

"Kind of hard to put your mind to practice when she just trots into camp and manages to make the rest of us look bad," Crisp pointed out. Dewpaw nodded in agreement.

"How's Cinderblossom," Robin asked quickly, completely changing the subject. Dewpaw met her eyes and found a hardness in them.

He shrugged. "Killian's been keeping her company." As he said the tom's name, he scanned the camp and found Killian, not with Cinderblossom, but sharing freshkill with Roxanne. They seemed to be enjoying each other's company as Roxanne told him of Beetlepaw's success in training. Sprucetail sat next to them, listening in with Bronco.

"Doesn't seem like he's doing that right now," Robin said pointedly. Oats and Crisp were looking between Dewpaw and the tabby she-cat, as if trying to decipher their conversation.

The grey tom narrowed his eyes. "Maybe you should go visit her then."

Robin stared at him incredulously. Before she could say another word, Dewpaw got to his paws. He didn't know where he was going, but he moved across the camp anyway.

As he walked, he realized Killian was now sitting on his own. Curious, he picked up Sprucetail's scent and, cautiously, followed it away from the camp. The trail led him over the camp fence, where the snowdrifts became taller. Their scents were being blown towards him, making him luckily upwind and hard to detect. For once, he was happy about his small form since it made it easier to hide in the snow.

He stopped abruptly when he saw a black pelt amongst the white and hid himself behind a large tree. Burrowing into the snow to further conceal himself, he listened.

"We need to step up their training, now," Roxanne was saying.

"Are you not listening?" The voice belonged to Nightchaser. "We don't have time. The longer we wait the more of our own die. They grow stronger every day – the newest batch of apprentices will be trained in assassination, for StarClan's sake! And if they have the ability to pick us off, one by one, then who will remain to put an end to Dawnstar's reign?"

"If we go into battle now, we won't survive either," Sprucetail said in her calm, low voice. "Maybe those of us who were raised in DarkClan, but the others don't stand a chance. Not the alley cats, certainly not the trainees or what remains of the gang. The only option is to intensify training."

"We've only seen Beetlepaw fight, what if Lightpaw is just as strong?" Bronco added, sounding nervous.

"She's the daughter of Spiderthorn and Dawnstar, after all. I'd be surprised if she couldn't fight." Sprucetail's words were rushed, as if she had cut someone off.

There was silence. Dewpaw strained to hear the next words, his ears battling the wind and his mind battling the sudden barrage of information.

"I'm Spiderthorn's kit too," Nightchaser said. "And if Spiderthorn and Dawnstar's kits are so dangerous to us, why are we sheltering them?" The last part came out as a low hiss.

"We're the only family they have left," Sprucetail said after a moment. "You're their half-littermate, so is Cinderblossom. Casting them out would mean death for them."

"But what if they've been sent here?" Nightchaser argued, voice rising.

"Then we have the capacity to subdue them," Sprucetail replied, unwavering.

"They're spying on us, trying to gain as much information as possible before DarkClan attacks."

"Then we will have to stop them before they do so."

"You don't believe me."

Sprucetail paused. "I - I hear your concerns. But I know that, if they are true, we can stop them."

"Did you not hear what she did during training today?!" Nightchaser screeched. Dewpaw winced, though he was nowhere near the tom as he unhinged. There was a scuffling sound, as if someone had been attacked or needed holding back.

"Yes, and I am confident that if anything happens I will be able to do something about it," Sprucetail continued. "I have Jaystrike, Bramblefire, and Beaver on watch too. They're strong enough to handle it. In the meantime, we will step up training for the trainees."

Nightchaser spat in rage. "Fine."

The meeting seemed unresolved but, from the shuffle of paws, Dewpaw knew it was over. He stayed hidden until long after they'd gone and the sun had set over the horizon, mind spinning with information he had once again, unknowingly to the speakers, heard.

One thing stood out: there was something off about Beetlepaw, but he wasn't quite sure what.

// chapter 26 //

By sunset, everyone knew of Beetlepaw's prowess in battle, which only made Lightpaw more anxious about their mission with the rebels. If they thought of Beetlepaw's skill so highly, what would happen if Lightpaw took part in training? In DarkClan her littermate was a good fighter, but she was better.

What would happen if they found out just how well trained the DarkClan apprentices were? That, from the few observations she'd made of the rebels' fighting skills, they didn't stand a chance? If they were forced to help in training, would it affect the results of their mission? Would it give the rebels a better chance against DarkClan, and make them traitors to their own Clan?

And there, in the midst of all of those questions was one that caused Lightpaw even more confusion: did anything regarding the mission and DarkClan even matter? So far, the rebels had taken care of them and let them be a part of their daily lives; they were the opposite of how Dawnstar had painted them.

Since their arrival and the interrogation a few days prior, Lightpaw had kept to the medic's den. She didn't want to interact with too many cats just yet and part of it was because she didn't know how she should approach them. Did they suspect her of anything? The sense of paranoia within the camp pervaded her senses day and night.

Crowpaw, at least, seemed friendly. She saw him most often, as Mothpelt and Lily were busy with their greencough patients. They hadn't wanted Lightpaw to catch the deadly cough and had moved her into a separate part of the medic's den quickly.

From what Lightpaw had gathered, Crowpaw was a new medic's apprentice. Despite the fact, he seemed to have a good knowledge of herbs and symptoms, as well as a sense of calm even when faced with a sick patient. This stood out to her most, especially when she thought about Reedpaw.

A pang of loneliness hit her as she thought of him for the tenth time in the four days she had been here. How was he dealing with Pigeonfang's and Dapplefrost's pregnancies? They would both be due soon and she, most likely, would not be there to support him. How was he faring with the greencough descending upon DarkClan too? And how were those sick with greencough? The thought of Yewpaw, coughing loudly, and Spiderthorn, his fevered eyes far-off, entered her mind and she shook her head to keep the thoughts at bay.

"Doing alright?" Crowpaw asked, dropping a mouthful of herbs in front of her.

"Better, thank you," she said. It was a half-truth. Though her head was now fuller than ever of thoughts about DarkClan, her mission, and her worries about those she'd left behind, she still woke every night with the image of those blank, dead eyes.

"Last dose of these. I talked to Mothpelt and she seemed to think you'd be fine to join the others for training sessions."

Lightpaw nodded. "It'll be nice to get out." The thought of fighting made her queasy, but she knew she would have to try. Maybe downplay her fighting skills so the rebels didn't know the extent of DarkClan's training.

As she ate the herbs she asked, "What are these?"

"Chamomile and thyme," Crowpaw responded. "Thyme is good for shock, it calms the body. Chamomile helps to keep your mind from racing."

Lightpaw purred slightly. "Sounds like something I need right now."

"What are you thinking about?"

She saw that he was watching her very curiously. The she-cat found she remembered him, however vaguely, from when he was still part of DarkClan.

"One of my friends, Reedpaw, is the healer in DarkClan. He was put in the position without a mentor and has been trying to learn

everything on his own. It works, usually, but he's always anxious that he'll hurt someone, or that an herb won't work."

Crowpaw cocked his head. "DarkClan still has healers? I thought Cedarheart and Mothpelt were the last."

Lightpaw shook her head. "No, Dawnstar decided that we needed a healer to help us stay alive. Some cats were very injured after the battle with the rebels..." She trailed off as she noticed the expression on Crowpaw's face. Thinking back to what she had just said, she nearly gasped in horror.

"I'm sorry," she spluttered. "It's just – I was raised in DarkClan. I haven't really gotten used to the fact that I'm no longer one of them."

The black tom seemed to accept her tale. "I myself have spent more of my life in DarkClan than I have outside of it. It gets easier." His tone was almost friendly, yet still guarded.

The tortoiseshell finished her herbs quickly, not wanting to give herself away. Her heart pounded as she got to her paws and said goodbye to Crowpaw, wishing him well with the greencough patients. He waved his tail in farewell before disappearing into the depths of the medic's den.

Lightpaw emerged into the camp to find it peaceful. The trainees were out for training with Roxanne, Jaystrike, and Beaver, their usual mentors. Beetlepaw had mentioned them in her stories about training – all of the two times she had visited Lightpaw in the medic's den. She had also mentioned Webpaw and her constant badgering; what little she remembered of Webpaw was that she had always been excitable and rather opinionated.

The she-cat found a spot in the sun, near the tumbled down Twoleg den that the camp was named after. From her vantage point, she could observe the camp and gather as much information as possible.

Two of the greencough patients – Cinderblossom and Flea – sat just outside the medic's den, also sunning themselves. Lightpaw noticed

that Cinderblossom, despite her Clan name, had no scars on her shoulder like the other rebels did. She did not know the she-cat but, given her soft name, had a few guesses as to why she had never received her warrior stripes.

Bronco, who she had deduced was the leader of the alley cats, sat next to Sprucetail, looking to be deep in conversation. The two were sitting close together, much closer than Lightpaw could remember any cats sitting in DarkClan.

On the side of camp across from them was a motley of other cats. A mottled black and grey tom, a blue tom, and a rust-coloured she-cat lazed around in the sun like the others in the camp but, somehow, they seemed separate. The only one on his feet was a muscled black and white tom who remained alert to the ongoings in camp.

The camp was fragmented, she realized. The alley cats, to whom the camp belonged, seemed resentful of the rebels taking up their space, and even more distant from the motley group. Their leaders, Bronco and Roxanne, seemed to get along with Sprucetail, who seemed to be the acting leader of the rebels. Sometimes, they were joined by Nightchaser, a giant tom named Condor, and Jaystrike, but rarely did any of the motley group take part in decision-making.

And then, separate from all of them, was a brown tabby tom. He had a sharp appearance, as if he had lived on his own for some time, and a resourcefulness in his eyes. Lightpaw was not sure what side he belonged to. He spoke with Sprucetail and seemed much closer to her than most; he also had long conversations with the black and white leader of the motley crew; his behaviour towards Roxanne was also curious and they often seemed amused in each other's presence, as if they shared a joke that only they knew.

The lack of unity intrigued Lightpaw. Most of all, it gave her another reason to believe the rag-tag group would not stand a chance against DarkClan.

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A half moon after they had arrived in camp, and just over a quarter moon since she'd been released from the medic's den, Lightpaw's

analysis of the rebel group was only confirmed. The longer she observed, the more the fragments became apparent.

Even training with the other trainees, as they were called here, was tense. Those with Clan names were clearly shunned by the older alley cat trainees, as were the cats that Lightpaw had learned belonged to the Junkyard Gang. With the knowledge that the gang no longer existed, she thought of Stormpaw and Rainpaw, sent to infiltrate their ranks. Their mission had dissolved, and through no fault of their own, but she could not even begin to predict Dawnstar's reaction.

Today, she was training with Jaystrike. From the past training sessions, she knew she was the best fighter here. Still, she had been hiding her skills and, more often than not, Beetlepaw would come out on top. The two had argued about keeping their training a secret but Beetlepaw had already let her skill slip; only Lightpaw could hide hers now.

"We're going to gang up on one cat today," Jaystrike said to his group, which consisted of Hazel, Oats, Dewpaw, Penny, and Lightpaw. Already, Lightpaw knew Hazel was the most determined of the group. Penny seemed new to fighting training, as did all of the gang cats, and Oats and Dewpaw, younger than the rest of the group, were still perfecting basic moves. Dewpaw, especially, had a hard time because of his deformed back leg but, to Lightpaw's surprise, he had used it with great success last training session by using it as a club.

"That cat is – Penny."

Lightpaw shot forward, heading for rust-coloured she-cat. Unprepared, the former gang cat yowled, jumping over Oats and causing him to collide with Dewpaw. Hazel veered off her course, leaping onto the smaller she-cat. Lightpaw followed suit, swiping at Penny's fore legs and chest while Hazel brought her weight down on her.

"That's enough!" Jaystrike called, seeing Penny had been defeated. The rust-coloured she-cat rose shakily to her paws, looking around at the others with frightened copper eyes.

"Be more aware of your surroundings," Jaystrike suggested, "it's alright if you aren't able to take on multiple cats at once right away." The she-cat nodded, somewhat relieved.

"Next up – Hazel!"

This time, the victim was ready. She swiped Oats aside quickly. The rule in these training sessions, since claws and teeth were not allowed, was that if the blow threw them far enough out of the 'battle field', they would be injured in reality. Lightpaw knew, from experience, that reality did not work that way.

With Oats out, Hazel focussed her attentions on Dewpaw. He, too, was soon out of the battle. With only Lightpaw and Penny remaining, Hazel turned to the gang cat. She shook as Hazel leapt.

"Get out of the way!" Lightpaw cried, slightly annoyed that the russet she-cat seemed to have not a single fighting bone in her body.

To her credit, Penny moved, and Hazel landed face first in the snow. Lightpaw took her chance and pounced, pinning Hazel down by the shoulders and pushing her further into the ground. She was lighter than the older she-cat, however, and was thrown off quickly. Hazel rounded on her and made to swipe at her snout.

Lightpaw ducked out of the way, catching Penny's eyes. The russet she-cat stood on the other side of Hazel, perfectly positioned to attack her from behind.

"Go!" she shouted, hoping the gang cat would realize her plan.

"Go where?" Hazel snorted, but Lightpaw's paw had already connected with her jaw. The alley cat gave a fierce snarl and rammed her body into Lightpaw's, knocking her over. The tortoiseshell gasped as she hit the ground hard. Hazel loomed over her and she, stupidly, was belly up.

In the span of a blink, Lightpaw rolled over and Hazel's next blow half-connected with her shoulder. Lightpaw gasped, remembering the feeling of claws in her shoulder all too well, and then she was

rising to her paws, turning swiftly to meet the other she-cat's next blow.

Parry, swipe, dodge. She danced around Hazel, looking for a way in.

Then, she saw it – the alley cat shifted to the right ever so slightly every time she swiped. Gritting her teeth in concentration, Lightpaw parried the next blow and jumped to the left. Then, with all of her strength, she rammed herself into the she-cat's left side. Hazel, already leaning slightly to the right with her last blow, lost her balance easily. Now, all Lightpaw had to do was push her out of the battle field and the fight would be over. Hazel struggled to get to her paws, but Lightpaw continued her assault.

Finally, it was over, and Lightpaw stood in the centre of the battle field all by herself, her sides heaving with the effort. Around her, the others in her group stood staring at her.

"Well done," Jaystrike said after some time. "I think that wraps up our session."

Oats looked in awe of her as he passed by, Dewpaw in tow. Penny scuttled away as quickly as possible. Hazel shot her a look so full of hatred Lightpaw almost felt the need to hiss at her.

Only she and Jaystrike remained.

"That was very impressive," the tom said, circling her. Lightpaw felt as she did at the interrogation, watched and mistrusted. She supposed it wasn't unwarranted.

"Thank you," she replied quietly. She sat down on the cold ground, wrapping her tail over her paws. The less threatening she looked, the better.

Jaystrike, however, didn't trust her ruse. "Don't look so innocent. From the way you fought during training today, I wouldn't be surprised if you were one of the best fighters amongst the apprentices in DarkClan."

Lightpaw's eyes flicked to the scars on his shoulder. Of course he

would know that, he had once been a part of DarkClan.

"Though, I must admit, they have been teaching you much more advanced moves than they ever taught us," he continued. "The last cat I remember who could fight like that was Spiderthorn."

The tortoiseshell's eyes widened. "Spiderthorn's my father."

"I know. I can see it in the way you fight. You strategize while you move, it's why you were able to knock Hazel over. Not many apprentices show that sort of awareness when fighting."

Lightpaw acknowledged his praise with a bow of her head. "I may be good at fighting, but my stealth is no good. I've been trying to work on it but I usually came in last during training."

"Sounds like Sprucetail," Jaystrike said, a softer expression on his face. "We worked on our battle and hunting skills together as apprentices. She was always a great fighter."

"Is she the leader of the rebels now?" Lightpaw asked before she could stop herself.

Jaystrike seemed amused. "I'm not sure. I don't think anyone is. But I support her, as do Mothpelt and Cinderblossom. I think she'd make a fine leader."

Lightpaw nodded. The tension when Jaystrike first started circling her had passed.

"Let's head back to camp, shall we?" he said. "I was hoping for some good freshkill tonight."

They walked back to the camp in a comfortable silence. Though Lightpaw had a bunch of questions regarding DarkClan on the tip of her tongue, she thought it best not to pry. She didn't want to give herself away.

Before the reached the camp, Sprucetail joined them.

"I heard what happened during training," she said quickly, looking between the two of them. "You're quite the fighter, aren't you?"

"But she's not quite that stealthy," Jaystrike replied. "Quite like someone I know."

Sprucetail shot him a half-amused expression. "Good thing I had you to yowl at me every time I brushed a leaf or stepped on a twig."

Lightpaw listened to their exchange, wondering if they had ever spoken to each other like this while still in DarkClan. Belatedly, she realized Sprucetail was the littermate Thistleshade had told her about.

"Thistleshade said that about you too," she blurted out. "When I talked to her about working on my stealth."

The she-cat suddenly looked sad. "Yes, Thistleshade was always the quieter one of the two of us. I'm surprised she risked talking about me."

So the rebels did know about the restrictions Dawnstar had placed on talk of the rebellion.

"It was just to make me feel better about it," Lightpaw said quickly.

"She was always good at that too," Sprucetail replied. "Very motherly." She took up the lead and Lightpaw, looking to Jaystrike for marching orders, found he was watching her with a wistful expression.

As they approached the camp, a certain gloom reached them. Sprucetail slowed her pace, falling into step with Jaystrike. Lightpaw stepped ahead, but listened to the exchange behind her.

"There's something I need to tell you, and it might be hard to hear. I know you and Birchfrost were always close and she was one of the finest mentors and guardians in DarkClan. But the greencough... I'm here if you need me."

Jaystrike's strangled cry rang out just as Lightpaw stepped into camp and saw the white and grey body lying in the centre of camp.

// This turned out longer than expected, but hopefully it makes up for all the time I was away for. Now tell me: any ships out

there? Any theories or guesses as to future events? I'd love to hear from you!

// chapter 27 //

Dewpaw sat vigil for Birchfrost throughout the night. Alongside him, Jaystrike, Condor, Cinderblossom, and Sprucetail said their silent goodbyes. Every time he closed his eyes, he remembered the first time he had ever seen snow, back in the cardboard camp of the alley cats, and Birchfrost's kind face as she explained what it was. It was a bittersweet memory now that she had passed.

Sitting next to Cinderblossom, he moved the tiniest bit closer. She had nearly been cleared by Mothpelt and her greencough was slowly going away, but the small coughs still rang out throughout the night until she was forced to retire to the medic's den. They did not speak to each other and, for the first time, Dewpaw felt a bit of guilt.

The following night the trainees returned from training to find a new body in the centre of camp. Quartz, the mentor they had all known and respected, looked so terribly small in death. Beside her lay another, the lilac-coloured tabby of the Junkyard Gang.

"No matter where we come from, death comes for us all the same," Nightchaser said quietly as the camp filled with grieving cats.

That night, the vigil was much larger. The trainees, in a show of solidarity, sat vigil around their fallen mentor, along with Condor, Bronco, Roxanne, and Beaver. The former gang said their silent goodbyes to Pixie opposite them. Yet, even in grief, there remained a tension in the air that Dewpaw could not explain.

After two straight nights of sitting vigil, Dewpaw fell into a deep sleep the third night. Surrounded by blackness, he remembered nothing of his dreams.

The morning after dawned cold but bright. The wind had picked up overnight and the bare branches of trees clicked together in protest. The sun continued to shine, the snow blindingly white beneath its rays. Dewpaw fluffed up his fur, unwilling to leave his nest.

The trainees had the day off today. Roxanne, Jaystrike, and Beaver were running a training session for the gang cats and any rebels and alley cats who felt they needed to brush up on their fighting skills. Nearly everyone had left camp, except for Condor, who stood guard, and the medic's, who continued to bustle around their patients. Since the deaths of Birchfrost, Pixie, and Quartz, the others had slowly gotten better. Crowpaw, in confidence, had told Dewpaw that they were all nearly healthy, and that Mothpelt insisted they stay in the den only to keep an eye on them for a few extra days.

"How do you feel about some climbing practice?" Oats bounded up the moment Dewpaw decided to leave his warm nest.

"Are my claws going to fall off from the cold?" Dewpaw asked, yawning.

Oats seemed to consider this possibility before shaking his head confidently. "Once you get started I'm sure you won't even feel the cold. You're going to be working so hard you'll forget it's leafbare!"

Dewpaw wasn't so sure, but followed the cream tom out of the camp anyway.

They found themselves in the copse of trees beside the frozen lake where Dewpaw had caught his first piece of freshkill. The trees sparkled in the sunlight, their trunks sheathed by a thin layer of ice, and Dewpaw felt the urge to turn tail. Oats dragged him on.

"Might be a little cold at first until we wear the ice down, but it'll get easier as we go along," Oats said conversationally. "Here, I'll go first."

With one bound, he had leapt up a quarter of the way to the tree's lowest branch. His paws moved one over the other, back legs scrabbling at the ice underneath and trying to catch a hold. In a few heartbeats, Oats had reached the branch.

"Come up, the view's great!" he called down. Dewpaw gritted his fangs.

He attempted a leap, as Oats had done, but his forepaws didn't find a hold on the tree trunk and he slid back to the ground.

"Try again!" Oats said supportingly. Dewpaw shook out his fur, wet from the snow, and leaped again, this time closer to the tree. His nose collided with the icy bark but his forepaws found purchase.

"Now pull and push yourself up!" The grey tom did as told, using his good back leg to support his weight while his forepaws worked their way up. He had to go slow, having only one back leg to support himself with. His muscles screamed at the effort.

I have to be almost there now, he thought but, looking up, he saw he was just past the halfway point. His disappointment weighed him down and his paws lost their hold. He ended up in a heap on the ground.

"Halfway, that's not bad!" Oats said. "That's the best you've done so far."

"Still not good enough," Dewpaw muttered.

"Do you mind if I join in?" The two toms jumped at the voice and whirled around to see a pale shape emerge from the snowdrifts. Her fur was white, speckled with blue and cream.

"Lightpaw," Dewpaw greeted. "We didn't hear you coming."

She brightened at this considerably. "Really? I've been working on my stealth."

"Well, it's working!" Oats piped up. He looked positively awe-struck.

"My climbing's not that great though," Lightpaw continued. "Would you perhaps be willing to teach me too?"

The cream tom looked like he could hardly contain his excitement. "Of course! Watch me first." And he repeated his ascent of the tree, climbing up to the second branch this time.

"Very impressive," Lightpaw said. Then, turning to Dewpaw, asked, "Ready to go?"

Dewpaw scowled. "Whenever you are." She didn't seem to take offence.

She leaped onto the trunk, sliding down a ways before her claws found a hold. Her determined stare found her objective: the first branch of the tree. With a great huff, she lifted one forepaw over the other, pushing against the tree with her back legs. She went slowly, muscles straining beneath her dappled pelt. Paw over paw, she got all the way up to the limb.

And then promptly lost her footing and fell to the ground. She landed on all fours, facing Dewpaw, breathing hard.

"Your turn," she gasped. Dewpaw wondered if she had lost her footing on purpose. If she had, she was very good at faking.

He leaped, this time finding a claw-hold immediately. A "good job!" sounded from Oats above, but Dewpaw tuned it out, focussing on the task at hand. He moved slowly but purposefully, just as Lightpaw had, pushing with his back leg. His breath came out in large gasps, melting the ice covering the bark with its heat, but Dewpaw pressed on.

After what seemed like an entire day, he found himself level with the first branch. Carefully, he maneuvered his body, straining to reach the branch with a forepaw. His claws hooked into it and he slowly moved his other paw over. Now, all that had to be done was swinging his back paws over.

For a moment, he thought it had worked. Then, he felt like his shoulders would pop right out as he realized he was hanging by his forepaws from the branch. He struggled to lift the dead weight up but it was no use.

"Drop, Dewpaw!" Oats said, this time from below. Looking down, Dewpaw saw a dizzying drop.

"I can't!" he said. "I won't be able to land!"

"Land on your back leg!" Oats called back.

Dewpaw's claws slipped from the branch and he flailed in the air for

a moment before coming to a crash on the snowdrifts below. The landing was not painless, despite the soft look of the snow.

"Did you break anything?" Oats asked, rushing over.

Besides the pain of hitting the ground with his whole body, Dewpaw felt fine. His back leg had broken his fall for the most part, and he never felt anything in that part of his body.

"Why don't we do some other training?" Lightpaw suggested.

"Like what?" Dewpaw snapped, suddenly tired and frustrated.

The she-cat looked taken aback. "I just thought I could give you some fighting tips, since you were kind enough to let me join your climbing practice."

Oats' eyes were shining. "Can we? Please?!"

Dewpaw knew he could return to camp on his own and leave the two to train. But did he really trust Lightpaw with one of his friends, alone?

"Sure," he said, quickly deciding on his answer. There was something about her – both her and Beetlepaw – that rubbed him the wrong way.

They walked a ways from the copse of trees, stopping at the usual training place. The trampled snow provided a sizeable training ground, and the steep slopes of snow around set the boundaries nicely.

"Why don't I watch you two first?" Lightpaw suggested. "I'll have a better idea of what to help you with."

Oats sprang into action immediately, shooting past the pale tortoiseshell and landing on Dewpaw's back. The cream tom was light and easy to throw off, but the attack caught Dewpaw off-guard. He stumbled sideways before righting himself.

The next time Oats jumped Dewpaw was ready. The cream tom was a good jumper and climber, and his speed in training nearly

unparalleled, but he didn't have the strength Dewpaw did. The grey tom dodged out of the way, careful to keep his balance, and brought a heavy paw down on Oats' back as he landed.

Oats shook off the blow, lashing out with a paw. Dewpaw blocked it, slowly moving his way around the other trainee. He needed to focus on keeping his balance, otherwise he wouldn't stand a chance. Adrenaline coursed through him.

The cream tom, tired of exchanging blows, suddenly leapt into the air, soaring over Dewpaw. The grey tom cursed internally, knowing that if he tried to follow Oats' movements he would likely end up in a heap. Instead, he waited for the telltale thud of the trainee hitting the ground.

The moment he heard it, he whipped around, his deformed leg swinging out behind him. The second thud told him Oats was on the ground. He purred smugly; it was not the first time the move had served him well in training.

"Alright, I think I have a few pointers," Lightpaw said.

Dewpaw whirled around, taking out Oats' legs from under him once more. He'd forgotten she was there.

She stifled a purr and approached the cream tom first. Oats puffed his chest out, ready for her assessment.

"You're really fast, and you're probably one of the best jumpers I've seen," she began. "You're also relatively small, which works to your advantage. But, you're not really using this to help you. You stayed battling Dewpaw face-to-face for far too long. He's stronger than you – look at the wideness of his shoulders compared to your own. That same difference makes him slower than you."

Oats looked over at Dewpaw contemplatively and the grey tom, suddenly self-conscious, looked away.

"Use your jumps and dodges more often. Skirt around your enemy. Duck in to swipe at their flank and then jump over them to hit them on the other side. They'll tire more quickly than you will, especially

if you keep them guessing and trying to track your movements."

"So I shouldn't fight like most cats do?" Oats said, cocking his head in confusion.

Lightpaw purred. "Every cat fights differently. If this is what keeps you alive in battle, why wouldn't you use it?"

The cream tom's furrowed brow straightened and he twitched his whiskers happily.

The tortoiseshell turned to Dewpaw.

"As I already mentioned, you have rather wide shoulders. This is good for heavier blows and blocking frontal attacks. Your speed... Well, it needs some work."

"You try being fast when you only have three legs," Dewpaw muttered under his breath.

Lightpaw looked taken aback. "Oh no!" she said, flustered. "That's not what I meant at all! Your speed when it comes to delivering blows and blocking. A blow is no good if you hit your enemy with the wrong timing."

She sat down, putting her paws in front of her. "Right now, your blows are spaced too far apart, which gives your enemy time to recover. If you hit them in a certain rhythm," – she demonstrated by pummelling the ground with her forepaws – "you're more likely to tire them."

Dewpaw looked at the she-cat curiously. "Go on."

"But, you shouldn't stick to the same rhythm the whole time. Otherwise, they'll know what to look for. Throw in some surprise punches."

The grey trainee nodded. "That makes sense." His voice was flat.

She nodded, seemingly oblivious to his deadpanning. "Good strategy with using your back leg as a club, by the way. That one was timed perfectly."

Despite him distrust of her, Dewpaw felt himself fill with pride. "Thanks."

"You're so knowledgeable," Oats gushed as they wrapped up their impromptu training session. "You must be the best fighter out there."

Lightpaw purred nervously. "I wouldn't say that. Besides, I'm no good at sneaking up on others, which makes me a lousy scout and hunter."

Dewpaw thought back to the numerous conversations he'd listened in on in the past moons. Was it possible that, despite his deformed back leg, his stealth was one of his strengths?

"Would make you a lousy spy too," Oats said. "I've been practicing sneaking up on others and it's amazing what you'll hear if they don't know you're there!"

For a brief moment, Dewpaw thought he saw Lightpaw flinch. Above, the clouds shifted and the world around them darkened for a heartbeat before being filled with rays of light once more.

Just a trick of the light, he thought to himself. Already, Lightpaw was responding to Oats' banter. Still, that prick of doubt remained.

// chapter 28 //

Lightpaw woke from a full night's sleep exhausted. The moment she opened her eyes she felt her fur prick with the feeling of being watched and the paranoia, never fully gone, rose again.

She had good reason to be careful. While some cats seemed to trust her immediately, or else were blinded by her skills, others remained skeptical. Nightchaser remained at the forefront, but she avoided him at all costs. Dewpaw was another, but avoiding him was tough considering training. DarkClan's insistence on keeping up her mask suddenly seemed much more useful.

Beetlepaw, on the other hand, assimilated into the group well in the moon they had been here. She was much more likeable here, in Lightpaw's opinion, and though her stubborn competitiveness still shone through she also tried harder to get along with the others. That group, of course, didn't include Lightpaw. The two hadn't spoken to each other in a couple of days.

Lightpaw found her littermate sitting near the freshkill pile, speaking with the large black and white leader of the former gang. He looked engrossed in her story, his tailtip twitching faintly near her own.

"Beetlepaw, can I have a word?" Lightpaw asked politely, approaching the two. Beetlepaw shot her littermate a reproachful look but realized she had an image to keep up.

"I'll finish that story later," she purred to Gannet, who nodded enthusiastically. Beetlepaw flicked her tail over his ear as Lightpaw lead her away.

When they stopped, a couple of tail-lengths away, Lightpaw rounded on her.

"Are you *flirting*?!"

Beetlepaw licked a paw and drew it over her ear nonchalantly. "Maybe. What's it to you? I'm trying to get close to some of the cats in this camp so I can learn more. It's more than you've been doing."

Her words stung. "I've been a little scared of being discovered. Oats made a comment about spies the other day, and Dewpaw clearly doesn't trust me – or you, for that matter."

Beetlepaw rolled her eyes. "Dewpaw's just jealous we can both fight."

"That still doesn't excuse the spying comment," Lightpaw said tersely. "And, besides, most of the alley cat trainees don't like us either."

"They're definitely jealous," the black she-cat replied. "Did you see the look of pure fury on Hazel's face the other day? Or Webpaw, she muttered insults under her breath the whole way back."

"How are we supposed to learn anything without giving ourselves away?" Lightpaw moaned, frustrated with their predicament.

"Do what I do."

"Pretend to be someone else?"

Beetlepaw's signature glare surfaced. "No. Be more likeable. I've got the gang covered, see if you can find an in with the alley cats. Make friends with the trainees, make up stories to get closer to them if you need to."

"Flirt?" Lightpaw offered.

Beetlepaw did not deem the suggestion worthy of a reply.

"Has it worked in your favour at least?" the tortoiseshell pressed.

The black she-cat looked around and leaned in closer. "I don't think we're the only spies here. Gannet has dropped hints that he knows of DarkClan, and more closely than an outsider would. I think that's why Rainpaw and Stormpaw were sent there – to link the gang with DarkClan."

The mention of the other mission made Lightpaw's worries about the two apprentices resurface. "You don't think they were punished for failing that mission."

Beetlepaw shrugged. "It wasn't their fault. Dawnstar probably wasn't too hard on them." Lightpaw wasn't convinced.

"Anyway, I should be getting back," Beetlepaw said, glancing back at Gannet, who watched her with warm eyes.

"Happy flirting," Lightpaw grumbled to her littermate before setting off to do some spying of her own.

//

The following training practice, Lightpaw did her best to downplay her fighting skills. She purred encouragingly at the other trainees and kept herself from correcting their strategies, though her tongue itched to do so. She congratulated them after successful rounds. On the way back to camp, she tried to seem attentive to their conversations, offering small pieces of her own.

"I'm starving," Hazel groaned as they settled around a large rabbit. It was thin from leafbare, but much larger than anything else in the freshkill pile.

"It was a rough practice," Soren agreed. "Wouldn't you agree Lightpaw?"

Lightpaw thought of the gruelling practices Rowanstorm would put them through, or of the hours of stealth training Oakshade mandated, or the fighting training Smoketalon nearly killed them with.

"One of the roughest so far," she said, taking a mouthful of rabbit.

"I find that hard to believe," Webpaw scoffed, taking her own bite. Lightpaw wondered if Webpaw's training in DarkClan had been just as hard as her own.

"Tell us more about training in DarkClan," came Leo's deep voice. He settled down next to Lightpaw and, from the surprised looks of

the other trainees, assumed his joining them was not a common occurrence.

"Well... They definitely put us through our paces when necessary," she said. Soren and Finch looked at her wide-eyed; Hazel and Webpaw studiously ignored her gaze.

"Does everything need to be perfect before they let you move on?" Olive asked.

"They definitely expect perfection," Lightpaw said somewhat bitterly. "I haven't passed my stealth training."

"And you never will," Hazel pointed out before turning to Olive. "Sounds like you'd have a rough time there." Lightpaw gathered that Olive was a bit of a perfectionist.

"Tell us more about the fighting," Finch said. Leo and Soren inched closer, eager to learn.

Lightpaw shuffled her paws uncomfortably. "Umm... Well, they would pit us against each other from dawn till dusk. Kind of the way training is run here, but for much longer. The loser would always be punished with something like cleaning dens."

"Did they have you unsheathe your claws?" Leo asked.

"I bet they made you fight till you bled," Soren added.

"Until you killed another trainee," Finch continued.

Lightpaw found herself speechless.

"N-no, never to the death," she managed to stammer out once she had found her voice. *Not with the other apprentices, anyway...*

"I think you're lying," Hazel said loudly, diverting the attention to her. "There has to be a reason why you're so jumpy. You've killed someone before." Her eyes bore into Lightpaw.

"I've fought in self-defense," she replied.

"So you have killed someone," the other she-cat pressed.

"Hazel, survival is important," Leo said, trying to break the tension. The brown tabby, however, did not back down and kept her eyes locked on Lightpaw.

"It is," Lightpaw echoed, flashing a grateful look at the older ginger tom. He twitched his whiskers happily, which only seemed to infuriate both Hazel and Webpaw further.

Sensing she was no longer welcome, and her appetite gone, Lightpaw excused herself. As soon as she got to her paws, however, she realized she had nowhere to go. Scanning the camp, she found Beetlepaw sitting next to Gannet, Shard, and Flea. Oats and Crisp sat with Dewpaw who looked away quickly when their eyes met.

"You look like you need something to do." Lightpaw whipped around to see Beaver's amused face. Beside him, Cinderblossom blinked at her.

"We were about to head out on a patrol," she said. "We need another member, if you'd like to join."

Lightpaw thought she had never felt more grateful to have patrol duty. "Of course, I'd love to."

Beaver gathered up Killian and Cobalt, and the patrol headed out.

"We'll be taking a look at the far border," Beaver explained as they padded over the tall wooden walls of Twolegplace. "DarkClan's been checking it frequently, but they haven't crossed over the border as of yet."

"Think they're terrified of having their throats ripped out?" Killian asked.

Beaver growled. "That's rather graphic, don't you think?" He shifted closer to Cinderblossom.

"I've seen worse," she said, but her shoulders remained tense. Lightpaw knew exactly what she meant. She noticed Beaver cast a worried glance at the grey she-cat, but he said no more.

The rest of the patrol was silent, though Lightpaw noticed the subtle shifts between its members. Cobalt, for the most part, remained at the back. Killian wound in and out, refusing to stay in a particular marching order. Every time he came close to Cinderblossom her fur rose, and Beaver pressed even closer, as if protecting her.

Lightpaw watched Killian carefully. She already knew he'd been a loner before finding the alley cats. He seemed to be a trusted part of the camp but something about his behaviour reminded her of a predator. His eyes never stopped moving and he was always alert.

"We're going to split up," Beaver said. "If you encounter a Clan cat hold them off and yowl for help. We have a lot of ground to cover, so we'll have to each do a section alone."

Lightpaw received the centre section, as she was the youngest and it was deemed the safest. Beaver and Killian moved off in opposite direction to mark the far sides.

The scents swirling around her were familiar and Lightpaw inhaled deeply. She found she missed them – Stormpaw, Rainpaw, Yewpaw, Reedpaw, even Spiderthorn. Her worries about the greencough in camp and the failed mission hit her hard and she distracted herself with marking the border.

She had only managed a small section when she froze. The scent of DarkClan was suddenly heavier.

"Who goes there?"

She turned and came face-to-face with another cat. He was so close she could feel his breath stirring her whiskers. The menacing green eyes shifted quickly to surprise.

"Lightpaw?"

The tortoiseshell took a moment to take in the DarkClan tom. "Shademask."

He stepped back to give her some room and her breath left her in a gust.

"You scared me," she said, heart still pounding. "I didn't hear you coming."

Shademask licked the top of his chest. "Well, I am one of the stealthiest."

"Mine's not getting much better," Lightpaw admitted.

"I'm sure you'll get there," he said encouragingly. They stared at each other for a moment, unsure what to say. He looked away first.

"Any news?"

Lightpaw shook her head, studying her paws. "We haven't learned much yet. We know their training isn't as structured as ours, and their trainees won't stand a chance against DarkClan. They've stepped up the training since we arrived, but I don't think it will be enough."

"What about Nightchaser?" Shademask said. "Have you seen him?"

"He tried to kill Beetlepaw and I when we first arrived," Lightpaw replied. "He seems unstable, out of his mind. Everyone seems to be scared of him."

"Dawnstar's been obsessed with finding out about him," Shademask admitted. "Sometimes, I think all of this is just about her getting her claws on Nightchaser. Everything and everyone else doesn't matter."

All of a sudden, he looked defeated. Lightpaw noticed the tiredness in his eyes and, on his flank, faint but noticeable scars. She didn't remember them being there before.

"What about camp?" she asked.

"She grows more restless every day. Spiderthorn tries to keep her in check, but her actions are more and more unpredictable. After Rainpaw and Stormpaw came back – "

"They didn't have anyone to spy on," Lightpaw blurted out. "The gang no longer exists. They're with the alley cats now."

Shademask nodded. "They tried to explain that there were no cats and, that when they attempted to track their scents, they were long gone. But Dawnstar wouldn't listen." His face looked almost fearful, but Lightpaw had to know.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"They were punished. I don't think they would have survived without Reedpaw helping them."

"And Reedpaw? How is he?"

Shademask seemed taken aback by the pleading tone of her voice. "He's alright. Spiderthorn survived the greencough, otherwise I'm not sure what would have happened to him." His tone was fearful, something Lightpaw had never heard in Shademask's voice before.

"What about Yewpaw?" she pressed.

His expression changed to one of sorrow and Lightpaw didn't need to hear his words to know what happened.

"I'm sorry, Lightpaw, he didn't make it."

The grief shot through her from chest to tail and she thought she might be sick. She felt Shademask's tail come to rest on her back lightly, and she buried her head in his chest, closing her eyes tight. Her littermate, gone. And she hadn't been able to say goodbye to him.

"I never got to say goodbye to my littermate either," Shademask said softly. He stiffened immediately afterwards. "I hear footsteps."

They sprang apart and the adrenaline coursing through Lightpaw forced her into a crouch.

"Tell Dawnstar she's made a grave mistake," Lightpaw hissed. Shademask growled in return, tail lashing.

"Your days are numbered," he replied. His eyes flashed, but they were not threatening.

Come home, they said.

"As are yours," Lightpaw managed. The footsteps grew closer and Shademask, looking about, turned tail and fled into DarkClan territory.

"Lightpaw, are you alright?" Beaver gasped out. The entire patrol had surrounded her and Lightpaw, in the middle, shook. Just over Cinderblossom's shoulder, she could see Shademask's retreating form, looking back at her. The grief of Yewpaw's death hit her all over again.

"I'll be alright," she said. "It's just that this is the first time I've seen any of them since..." She let each member of the patrol fill in the rest.

Beaver nodded understandingly. "We should head back, let Bronco and Sprucetail know what happened."

As Lightpaw turned to move, she noticed Cinderblossom's eyes on her. They were narrowed, suspicious; it was obvious the grey she-cat had seen something that left her unconvinced.

Lightpaw followed the patrol but Cinderblossom blocked her path. The tortoiseshell's heart beat faster and meeting the older she-cat's eyes took all of her willpower. The hazel eyes were hard.

"I didn't turn my own littermate in, and I won't turn you in either," Cinderblossom said quietly. "But I will tell you to choose carefully."

Her eyes softened, their usual warmth filling them. "I know you'll do what is right."

// Over 1.5k likes on Unmarked and 50k reads on Unmasked?! Thank you thank you thank you!

// chapter 29 //

Big flakes of snow fell from the murky sky, leaving swaths of white on the frozen ground. Dewpaw watched their descent calmly, paws tucked underneath his grey chest, from the shelter of the Tumble Down Den. He hated the cold, but the fresh snow meant training was cancelled and it was a welcome reprieve from the intensity of the past moon.

Dewpaw found no joy in training anymore, despite his slowly growing understanding of his own abilities. The others were always so competitive and, with the threat of DarkClan attacking looming ever closer, the higher ups of the camp kept pushing for more and more and more.

Just a couple sunsets prior, Beaver's patrol had encountered a Clan cat – or, rather, Lightpaw had. He still didn't know what to make of her.

The snow held a lull over the camp, the first peaceful day in Dewpaw's recent memory. There were no cats rushing about trying to get patrols in order. There were no trainees sitting around freshkill and arguing over battle strategies. It was still early and, so far, Dewpaw had only seen Sprucetail wandering in and out of the camp.

Briefly, he wondered if he should follow her, but decided against it. Though his paws itched to test his stealth, he knew the more often it happened the more likely he was to get caught. Already, he knew he'd heard much more than anyone should have overheard.

He had tried piecing the various bits of information together – Mothpelt's revelation of her dream and the need for the three Clans of old to rise again, Gannet and Killian's conversation of joining the fight, and Nightchaser's arguments about DarkClan and the need to attack. One thing was certain: they were going to fight DarkClan and, if they won, establish the three Clans of old, just as this StarClan had told Mothpelt to. If they didn't...

Dewpaw didn't want to think about that and instead rose to his paws. With training out of the question today, he decided hunting would be his best course of action. Ever since Sprucetail decided to increase training, the trainees had spent very little or no time hunting and Dewpaw found he missed it sorely.

He crept out of camp and disappeared in the direction of the border.

//

He returned to camp with sunhigh still a ways away, two mice in his jaws. He was surprised he'd scented them through the stench of DarkClan, let alone caught them with his lack of recent hunting training. He had put himself to work testing his stealth instead, and found that he was a lot quieter than he thought. He had even managed to sneak up on Killian, who had also decided to make himself useful by hunting.

"Nice catch!" purred Beaver as Dewpaw entered. He nodded his head, surprised to find Cinderblossom sitting at Beaver's side. They had seemed rather close as of late.

He dropped the freshkill in the meagre pile and turned in the direction of Oats and Crisp, who sat chatting with, to Dewpaw's annoyance, Beetlepaw and Lightpaw. He decided to visit Crowpaw instead.

"Haven't seen you in a while," Crowpaw commented as he sorted herbs.

Dewpaw wrinkled his nose at their scents. "Training has been so intense we hardly ever had time to ourselves," he replied.

"Must be snowing pretty hard out there to deter Jaystrike from a training session," Crowpaw said dryly. He was still not on good terms with his ex-mentor.

The grey tom shook his head. "It's not too bad. Managed to do some hunting."

The medic's apprentice lifted his head briefly from his sorting.

"Hunting is probably the only thing I miss about warrior training. Otherwise, I think this was really the best thing to happen to me. Thank you, Dewpaw." His voice was genuine warm and happy.

Dewpaw whisked his tail. "I'm happy for you."

"Me too, especially since I don't need to put up with Webpaw and Hazel everyday." The two she-cats had grown ever more competitive, especially now that Beetlepaw and Lightpaw had proved themselves decidedly better in battle.

"Webpaw's happy for you too," Dewpaw said quickly. "But, yes, they can be a pain."

"Dewpaw, you're not in pain are you?" Mothpelt asked as she entered the den, voice muffled through the soggy leaves in her mouth.

He shook his head. "No, just visiting Crowpaw."

The she-cat dropped the leaves to the ground. "Oh, good, but make sure he doesn't slack on his duties. I just rescued these leaves from the weather, hopefully they'll dry out nicely and still be useable. Crowpaw, make sure to lay them out separately."

Crowpaw nodded, hopping to his paws and starting on the work. Dewpaw watched in amazement as his paws skillfully separated the wet leaves and put them out in a straight line along the den's edge. The tom was meticulous, smoothing each leaf out with a couple of brushes with his paw.

His methodical approached pricked at Dewpaw, and he wondered if the tom might be able to help him figure out his earlier musings. He looked left and right for signs of others before speaking.

"Crowpaw, do you know anything of Mothpelt's dreams?" he started.

The black tom shook his head. "No, but I've been told that StarClan visited medicine cats in the Old Life frequently. I haven't been visited yet but if we defeat DarkClan I'm sure it will happen."

"Do you know what will happen after we defeat DarkClan?" Dewpaw asked.

Crowpaw hesitated for a moment. "Mothpelt told me that we were going to establish the three Clans of old. But don't tell anyone else."

Dewpaw nodded. "I already overheard her saying so to Cinderblossom."

The other apprentice purred ruefully. "Anything else you've managed to overhear? I hardly hear anything while I'm stuck in this den." He didn't sound disappointed, just curious.

"I heard Sprucetail and Nightchaser arguing about the attack on DarkClan," Dewpaw replied in a hushed voice. "She wanted to increase training and he said there was no time, that they were too close to attacking. He seemed to think Beetlepaw and Lightpaw were sent as spies for DarkClan."

Crowpaw's head snapped up. "You do know that Nightchaser is unstable, right?"

Dewpaw's eyes widened at Crowpaw's frank tone of voice. He hoped, for the tom's sake, that Nightchaser was nowhere near hearing range.

"Sprucetail knows what she's doing," Crowpaw continued. "She takes Nightchaser's worries into consideration, but she needs to think about everyone else too. She and Bronco have been working together to provide the best possible life for all of us here until we're ready to face DarkClan."

"Yes, but what if Nightchaser's right? What if there are spies in the camp?"

Crowpaw paused. "I know you've seen Beetlepaw and Lightpaw fight, but have you seen Sprucetail?"

Dewpaw shook his head.

"Well, if you had, you would know the two of them wouldn't stand a chance against her."

The grey apprentice found this hard to imagine when Lightpaw's fighting skills were already so high above his own.

"Point is, Sprucetail knows what she's doing, and intensifying training is really the only course of action she could take. If she didn't and we attacked DarkClan right away, most of us wouldn't survive." Crowpaw shuffled the herbs in front of him around until they were in tidy piles. "Some of us may still not."

Dewpaw felt a blow to his chest. Until Crowpaw had said it out loud, the possibility of his friends dying in battle had not crossed his mind.

A stir at the front of the medic's den made them both silent. A small tabby and white figure appeared.

"Robin," Crowpaw greeted. "What can I do for you?"

"Crowpaw, Dewpaw," she greeted in return. She turned to Dewpaw first. "I was just wondering if – "

"I'd spoken to Cinderblossom?" Dewpaw interjected. "Because the answer is no."

She scowled and opened her mouth to speak again when a commotion from outside sent them all running for the den entrance.

The first thing Dewpaw saw was a mass of black and red in the centre of camp. The metallic scent of blood hit him quickly and the heaviness of the cat's breathing pervaded the air. Then, he saw the white fur surrounding golden orbs, hidden within the black.

"Nightchaser!" Sprucetail's voice cut through the camp. Nightchaser coughed, his sides heaving. Dewpaw lost sight of him as others rushed towards him, each shouting over the other.

"Get back, he's hurt!" Mothpelt's voice rose above the rest and the crowd slowly shifted aside. Sprucetail and Bronco stayed near, looking at the black tom incredulously.

A rustle to the left turned Dewpaw's attention from the scene, and he saw Lightpaw, Crisp, and Oats join the three of them. They

looked just as confused as Dewpaw felt.

"What happened?" Sprucetail asked immediately. "You stink of DarkClan!"

Nightchaser took a couple of breaths while Mothpelt pored over his pelt, muttering under her breath.

"I – I killed him," he rasped.

Not a muscle moved in the entire camp and Dewpaw was almost certain everyone was holding their breath.

"Killed who?" Sprucetail said quietly. Her fur stood on end and her eyes were wide. Dewpaw's eyes ran over the three scars on her shoulder and he wondered if she was thinking about the family she'd left behind.

"The one cat who can help them if we attack," Nightchaser said as if in a trance. "The most important one in battle, the one who takes care of all the injured warriors."

Dewpaw felt a sick feeling in his stomach. The words were intensely familiar, almost too much so. He turned to look at Crowpaw and saw his horror mirrored there.

Nightchaser's words were almost identical to what Dewpaw had said in front of the jury who granted Crowpaw his position as medic's apprentice.

"Reedpaw!" The scream from his left made him spring to action. He swung his leg as Lightpaw threw herself forward, taking her back legs out from beneath her. Oats, Crisp, and Robin quickly pinned down her shoulders.

"Reedpaw!" she cried again, struggling to get up under their combined weight. Beaver had already raced over to help subdue her. Sprucetail's eyes shifted from Lightpaw to Nightchaser, her tail lashing.

"We'll win now," Nightchaser said and the happiness in his voice filled Dewpaw with disgust.

Sprucetail rounded on him, face full of fury. "You infiltrated the DarkClan camp alone at the crack of dawn and killed an innocent cat so you could be sure we would win?!" Dewpaw, and nearly everyone sitting around the edges of the camp, shrank back. The black she-cat suddenly looked three times larger, and her entire body shook with anger.

"Without a medic, they'll have no way of healing their injured after the battle," Nightchaser replied, so calmly Dewpaw shivered.

"That medic had no mentor, the chances of all of the injuries being healed properly were low as it was!" Sprucetail shouted at him. Dewpaw saw Lightpaw flinch, and wondered who the now dead medic had been to her. Her brother, perhaps? Or a close friend she cared for deeply? He glanced over at Crowpaw, wondering what he might feel like should the black tom suddenly die.

"But now they're non-existent," Nightchaser said in the same low voice.

Sprucetail's eyes narrowed. "You rebelled against DarkClan because you believed killing innocents wasn't right. In the Old Life, killing a medicine cat was punishable by death."

The entire camp drew in a breath, waiting for her next words to fall.

"I'm not a cold-blooded killer," she hissed through her fangs, "and I won't be killing you either. But your actions make me wonder if you're no better than *them*."

She nodded her head to Mothpelt, who began the task of moving Nightchaser to the medic's den. Crowpaw sprang to her help, Lily following soon after. Dewpaw kept his eyes trained on Nightchaser's face, the far-away look in his eyes irking him.

And the fact that Dewpaw's own words had come from Nightchaser's mouth... The guilt weighed heavily in the trainee's stomach.

The freshly fallen snow in the centre of camp, stained red by

Nightchaser's blood as a result of his terrible actions, was gone by nightfall.

// I sincerely apologize for any broken hearts, but it had to be done.

// chapter 30 //

The weight on her shoulders slowly lifted, but Lightpaw had no strength to get to her paws. Her mind whirled with images, of blood on a tabby pelt and blank, staring copper eyes.

"Lightpaw?" The voice sounded far away and the cream face in front of her was hazy. There were others too, a splash of brown and grey and black.

"Lightpaw, I'm going to help you into the medic's den." Cinderblossom's voice was soft, the brush of her tail over Lightpaw's back almost comforting.

The tortoiseshell shook her head. "No."

"Lightpaw, I know Reedpaw was your friend," Sprucetail cut in, her voice more firm. "But I can't let you lay here for the rest of the day."

"Please, let me help you," Cinderblossom said, pushing her shoulder to Lightpaw's own in an effort to help her up. Still, the tortoiseshell refused.

"*He's* in there." Her words dripped hatred.

They all paused around her. She let her eyes wander over them, vision clearing slightly. Sprucetail looked torn, while Cinderblossom's face held a heartbreakingly sad expression. Behind them, she could just make out the worried forms of Oats, Crisp, and Robin.

"Let's move you somewhere more private," Sprucetail decided. "I'll get Mothpelt to check on you there."

Lightpaw found herself in a pseudo-den with bramble walls, their branches intertwining slightly overhead. The snow was still able to sift its way through, but the ground remained mostly brown beneath her paws. Outside the bramble thickets stood Killian, who

seemed to be sitting guard. A twinge of annoyance at being treated like a prisoner joined the grief and shock swirling inside of her.

Mothpelt found her by sunhigh, herbs clamped tightly in her mouth. One sniff and Lightpaw felt the grief well up inside her, threatening to spill. The lavender was too much.

"Eat them, they'll make you feel better." Mothpelt's insistent gaze never wavered as Lightpaw fought back the sadness. She thought of the den Reedpaw occupied – had occupied – in DarkClan and the way it had always smelled of lavender. If she'd had the strength, she would have gotten to her paws and run as far away as possible.

"Lightpaw, I need you to eat these. They'll help, I promise."

Lightpaw's eyes met Mothpelt's and the sob broke past the constriction in her chest and throat.

"He always smelled of lavender."

Mothpelt's eyes softened and the grey she-cat sat down. "Was he always sorting herbs?"

Lightpaw shook her head. "No, but he was always doing something – collecting herbs, sorting them, talking to the cats who visited him, healing them."

"Did you speak with him often?"

Lightpaw twitched her whiskers bitterly. "He was one of my closest friends."

Mothpelt nodded in understanding. "He sounds like quite the friend."

"He is." The scent of lavender ebbed slightly. "I mean, he was."

Reedpaw. Her friend, her confidante, the cat she went to with everything. She remembered his worry over being a good enough healer for the Clan, remembering the correct herbs and their uses. He tried so hard, for so little reward.

And now, he was gone.

Mothpelt remained silent, letting the younger she-cat grieve. When she finally spoke, her story was of sorrow.

"Wrenflight was my littermate. For moons, she had also been my closest friend, and Nightchaser's too. She kept both of us believing that the rebellion would work, that we could fight against Dawnstar and the ideals DarkClan tried to thrust onto us. She believed we could all have a better life after it was all over.

"That night, on what we thought was the darkest of nights, she lost her life. Dawnstar killed her right before our eyes. I've never seen Nightchaser so broken. I've never felt so broken. Wrenflight died for our cause, but Dawnstar didn't kill her because she was instrumental to it. She killed her because she knew that Wrenflight was important to Nightchaser, to me, to so many others fighting for our freedom.

"Reedpaw... He was important to DarkClan too. It doesn't excuse Nightchaser's actions, but I just want you to understand why it was him and not someone else. Nightchaser hit DarkClan where it hurts, and he hit you where it hurts too. I don't know if this changes your mind about the rebels, about us, and I wouldn't blame you if it did. I know how it feels to lose someone so close to you, and it's alright to be angry, and shocked, and grieving."

Lightpaw closed her eyes, the emotions roiling inside of her. Her head hurt with the events of the day; her body ached with a need to run; her claws itched to sink into Reedpaw's killer's flesh.

"But don't let it get to the core of who you are," Mothpelt continued. "Wrenflight's death hurt me but I didn't let myself lose control; Nightchaser was driven mad by her loss. It's up to you to remain strong and never lose sight of what it is you want your life to be."

When Lightpaw opened her eyes, the medic was turning to leave.

"Eat the herbs," she said again. "They will help you, at least for now."

Lightpaw's last thought before the herbs took effect was of Reedpaw receiving his full name, and the sadness as she realized he never would.

//

The next days were torture. Grief followed her like a black cloud, scaring anyone and everyone away. It enveloped her, reminding her not only of Reedpaw but of Yewpaw too. She felt like she had lost much more than that – the idea of returning to DarkClan suddenly seemed impossible.

The eyes followed her too, some curious, others condescending, all watchful. Hazel and Webpaw did not show her the slightest bit of kindness; Leo tentatively approached her, offering a shoulder to cry on after the recent loss of his own littermate; Beetlepaw looked disapproving, as if she was throwing off their mission. Lightpaw felt guilt at that, too, that continuing the mission seemed so futile to her all of a sudden.

Sprucetail, Bronco, Killian, and Jaystrike watched her in turns. She was always aware of one of them near her, as if they were waiting for her to strike. She had seen Nightchaser only once since the day he killed Reedpaw, and the itching in her claws and burning in her stomach had risen to new heights. Still, she had not attempted to kill him. Whenever she remembered the blood of Jet between her claws, she realized she did not *want* to kill him. Yet, the hatred remained.

The only cats who didn't seem to judge her with their gaze were the former gang cats, and so Lightpaw found herself eating freshkill with them one sunny leafbare day. Flea, named for her flea-ridden pelt, and Penny, who had grown on Lightpaw since her catastrophic battle skills had been displayed, pushed the half-eaten crow closer to her.

"Eat up, you're getting thin," Flea said, her own pelt clinging to her ribs.

Lightpaw took a grateful bite. It had been just over a quarter moon since she learned of Reedpaw's death and her reflection had taken

her by surprise. She was, indeed, thinner than she remembered, and her pelt lacked its usual lustre.

"Penny, what do you think those two are doing?" Flea scratched at her ear with a hind paw, then flicked it at two cats on the other side of camp. Lightpaw followed their gazes to see Gannet and Beetlepaw swatting at each other playfully, purring the whole while.

"I'm not sure," Penny said. "Maybe they're just fighting over the last bit of freshkill?"

Lightpaw snorted. "That's my littermate, and she doesn't fight over freshkill. She just takes it."

Flea twitched her whiskers in amusement. "And that's *my* flea-brained littermate. He's been absolutely infatuated with Beetlepaw, anytime I talk to him he's always going on about her."

The tortoiseshell flicked an ear; this was news to her. "I'm actually surprised she gets along well with anyone, let alone a tom. She's the most stubborn cat I've ever met."

"I doubt that, seeing as Gannet is the most stubborn cat you'll ever meet," Flea replied, taking another bite of crow.

Penny, usually quiet, chimed in. "Maybe that's why they're so perfect for each other."

The idea of Beetlepaw being perfect for anyone made Lightpaw want to gag. Though the grief still weighed heavily on her, she found herself enjoying the sunny afternoon and their light-hearted chatter.

"Well, I better get going," Flea said, finishing off the crow. "I asked Jaystrike to give me some extra training today. Do either of you want to join in?"

Penny's fighting skills were dismal at best but she nodded and padded off in the direction of Jaystrike. Lightpaw rose to her paws more slowly, shaking her head.

"I have a patrol to be on," she explained. "But I'll catch you later?"

Flea nodded, whiskers twitching happily. "Of course! Someone's got to keep an eye on our mouse-brained littermates, right?"

Lightpaw joined Leo at the camp entrance, where they waited for the rest of the patrol. As soon as she sat down beside him, she noticed Hazel and Webpaw shooting daggers in her direction. The tortoiseshell shifted uncomfortably, unsure what to make of it.

Leo purred. "Don't worry about them, they're just jealous." Beetlepaw had told Lightpaw just as much.

"But why?" Lightpaw asked. "I'm really nothing special."

"Are you kidding?" Leo asked incredulously. "You're an amazing fighter, you can hunt pretty well, and you're probably one of the most attractive she-cats in camp."

Hazel and Webpaw, having overheard his comment, intensified their glares. Lightpaw's pelt burned.

"Oh, umm, I didn't realize you thought that way of me," she mumbled.

The ginger tom flicked his tail. "Well, there's also the fact that they've been fighting over me for a couple of moons now. It looks like they've banded together now that they have a common adversary." He looked at Lightpaw almost adoringly and she shifted her paws uncomfortably, eager for the rest of the patrol to appear.

Roxanne bounded over to them in a few short strides, Killian appeared out of nowhere, striding over lazily, and Sprucetail joined them shortly after, moving with her usual grace. Lightpaw stared at her, wishing she could one day be as powerful as the black she-cat.

"We should be off, I think there's a storm rolling in," Sprucetail said, sniffing the air. "We'll be stopping to hunt along the way, the freshkill pile's a little low."

The snow, higher than the last time Lightpaw patrolled the area, impeded their movement only slightly, and they soon arrived at the

small, still frozen lake. Sprucetail communicated the plan to them with her tail – they would move around the lake, stopping to hunt where possible.

No sooner had she done this, she dropped into a hunter's crouch. Jumping forwards, she swore loudly as the shrew scrambled out of her grasp.

Roxanne, however, shot forward and captured the shrew with a single paw.

"Good catch," Sprucetail praised.

They continued on. A snow-white bird, alarmed at their approach, took off and Leo leaped for it, hooking it with a claw. Lightpaw congratulated him for the brilliant catch and regretted it soon after when he licked his chest modestly and gave her that same adoring look as before.

As they travelled around the lake, it turned out that Roxanne was the best hunter amongst them. She would stop the patrol with a flick of her tail, ears turning this way and that, and suddenly she would jump and reappear with freshkill in her jaws.

"Looks like Roxanne's stealth far outmatches yours," Killian teased Sprucetail, but the black she-cat payed him no mind. Lightpaw noticed that, unlike on previous patrols where Killian wove in and out of the other members, he had stayed strangely close to Sprucetail on this one.

Roxanne puffed out her chest proudly. "Thank you." The look that crossed her face was eerily similar to the one Leo had given Lightpaw. Realizing she had yet to catch something, the tortoiseshell turned to the task at hand.

By the end of their patrol, they had managed to catch two shrews, a bird, a mouse, and a vole between them.

"Nice work everyone," Sprucetail said, surveying their small stock. "It seems like there was more prey out today, perhaps newleaf is closer than we think."

"Fighting DarkClan would be easier without all of this snow around us," Killian agreed, scooping up some of the freshkill. Roxanne and Leo picked up the rest.

As Lightpaw moved to help, Sprucetail lay a gentle, yet firm, tail over her shoulders. "Go ahead to camp, Lightpaw and I will be along shortly." The others obeyed without protest, though Roxanne gave Sprucetail a reproachful look.

Lightpaw's heart beat wildly. Why was Sprucetail holding her back? She matched her pace to the she-cat's.

"I know you've been grieving, and I know what it feels like to lose someone close to you," Sprucetail began. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Lightpaw nodded her head solemnly, heart rate calming slightly.

"There is, however, still the question of your allegiance."

The tortoiseshell tripped over her own paws, startled. "My what?"

Sprucetail purred, turning to face her. "You play a good game, I'll give you that. But I was raised in DarkClan too. That mask of yours – or Beetlepaw's – doesn't fool me."

Lightpaw gulped. So Sprucetail had believed Nightchaser all along. Why had she let them stay in camp for so long?

"My littermate, Thistleshade, and her mate, Oakshade, have been passing information to us since the rebellion," Sprucetail continued. "I know I can tell you this because I've seen your faith in DarkClan slipping while you were here, and Thistleshade has told me of your reluctance to kill in the Clan. When you arrived here, shaken from killing a cat in self-defence, I knew you weren't like the rest of them. Beetlepaw, for all her arrogance, wouldn't kill a cat in cold blood either."

Lightpaw stared at the dark she-cat wide-eyed, unsure whether she should flee or stay as still as possible. Her mind whirred: Sprucetail had known all along, yet had done nothing to turn them in. She had let them participate in practice, eat from the freshkill pile, makes friends with the others in camp.

"Only Bronco, Jaystrike, Roxanne, and I know," the she-cat said. "We've been keeping information from Nightchaser to keep his erraticism under control. If we had told him you were spies he would have killed you right away."

"Why are you keeping us safe if you know we're spying on you?" Lightpaw blurted out.

Sprucetail twitched her whiskers. "Because I've known both of you since you were kits. You, especially, listened earnestly to Nightchaser's tales. You've refused to kill, despite that fact that you could be killed for doing so. You were kind to others – to Thistleshade, to Rainpaw, to Reedpaw. Don't think those things went unnoticed."

"I don't understand," Lightpaw said. "If I wanted to, I could run back to DarkClan right now and tell them everything."

Sprucetail shook her head knowingly. "You wouldn't because you wouldn't leave your littermate behind on her own. You also wouldn't because you don't agree with the way Dawnstar runs the Clan – you were appalled by her treatment of Rainpaw and Stormpaw." Lightpaw stared at the she-cat; she really did know everything.

"You also know you can't outrun me," Sprucetail pointed out, "but I think there are larger things at play here. You've grown to care about the cats here."

"And if I proved you wrong in all of these?" Lightpaw asked quietly, her voice wavering along with her confidence.

Sprucetail shrugged. "We have nearly thirty cats on our side waiting to fight. DarkClan, including the pregnant she-cats, has less. If you ran right now, we would attack by nightfall."

Lightpaw shook with fear. All that paranoia, the feeling of constantly being watched, had been real. She and Beetlepaw had never had the upperhand.

But had Lightpaw ever truly wanted to spy on the rebels? She

remembered the dream she'd had before Jet attacked the kittypets and her inability to answer Nightchaser's question. Her horror at having killed a cat in self-defense was not something any other DarkClan cat would have felt. And, despite her trying to convince herself that she was trying to befriend the cats here as a way to spy on them, she found she actually enjoyed their company.

Her dawning realization must have shown because Sprucetail rose to her paws.

"It's been a long day. Why don't we head back to camp?"

Lightpaw gazed briefly at the horizon, in the direction of DarkClan's camp. The sun was slowly beginning to set, painting the sky in daffodil and lavender.

She followed Sprucetail instead.

// chapter 31 //

There was a certain tension about the camp in the days following Nightchaser's confession. Dewpaw found Beetlepaw less agreeable, as if she were angry about the DarkClan healer's death, and a cloud of gloom followed Lightpaw, who hardly spoke.

With the expectation of a retaliatory attack, Jaystrike, Beaver, and Roxanne had stepped up the intensity of training once more, taking the trainees out for their first round before sunhigh, stopping by camp for a quick bite of freshkill, and putting them through a second round before sunset. Dewpaw longed for a day off by the end of a quarter moon.

"We're doing some extra training today," Jaystrike said as he passed Dewpaw, Oats, and Crisp on his way to the camp entrance. "Would you like to join?"

Oats got to his paws immediately, Crisp following soon after. Dewpaw noticed Flea and Penny heading for the meeting spot as well.

"I can't," Dewpaw mewed back. "I was asked to go on patrol by Condor."

Jaystrike waved him off with a flick of his tail, already on his way to training.

Sprucetail was gathering up her own patrol of Roxanne, Killian, Leo, and Lightpaw. Dewpaw narrowed his eyes at the tortoiseshell, who was shuffling her paws awkwardly at something Leo had said. Not far from them, Webpaw and Hazel glared at her too. Even after her extended stay at the camp, Dewpaw still couldn't place why he felt so off about her.

"Ready to go?" Condor asked, passing him with Shard at his side. The two toms had grown rather close after the junkyard gang joined their cause. "Gannet and Hazel will be joining us shortly." Dewpaw's

eyes flicked to Gannet, who was busy play-fighting Beetlepaw, and found he disagreed.

Sure enough, Gannet was the last to join them. Hazel scoffed quietly as he approached, his fur a mess. Realizing his dishevelled state, the black and white tom quickly licked down some of his stray patches of fur.

"Where to?" he asked. Dewpaw looked the tom over, remembering his and Killian's conversation. Whose side was he on?

"The fence closest to the DarkClan border," Condor replied, already setting a brisk pace. "We haven't encountered any cats there since Beaver's patrol a half moon ago, but we need to keep checking..."

In case they are planning to attack, Dewpaw filled in. The rest of the patrol seemed to do the same.

Along the way, Gannet managed to corner a mouse against a fence, killing it with one swift bite. Dewpaw had to admit that, if he was a spy, he was fitting into their camp nicely.

They arrived at the border just after sunset, the inky blackness making it hard to discern where the others were. Gannet's white fur shone brightest, the black on him disappearing into the darkness. Dewpaw followed him most closely.

"Mark the border quickly," Condor said. "I smell DarkClan, and I wouldn't want to get caught out here in this darkness."

The patrol did as told, moving along the borderline swiftly. Dewpaw arrived at their meeting point first, followed by Hazel and Condor, and finally Shard. As they waited for Gannet, who had been given the section furthest from them, Condor suddenly stiffened.

"Are those rebels I smell?" The voice coming out of the darkness dripped poison and cruelty. From the shadows emerged five cats. In the low light, Dewpaw saw that two were ginger, two were grey, and one, the smallest of them, was black.

"We'll mark our territory and be on our way," Condor assured them, though he remained tense.

"Very well." The leader of the patrol seemed to be the larger of the two grey toms. He stepped forward, closer to them, and Dewpaw's eyes widened.

The DarkClan tom looked exactly like him. His grey, short fur and the size of his paws; the length of his tail, and the hazel of his eyes. The only difference, as far as Dewpaw could see, was his lack of deformities.

"You forget that you are on DarkClan territory, however," the tom continued, voice lowered. "Your territory is on the other side of this wall." Behind him, the other members of his patrol unsheathed their claws.

The grey tom surveyed the rebel patrol, eyes sliding lazily over each member. Finally, they came to a stop on Dewpaw, who shrank back. The light in his hazel eyes was hard and menacing, almost revelling in his cruelty.

His whole life, Dewpaw had believed he looked like his mother, that the grey fur and hazel eyes came from her. Yet, the longer he held this tom's gaze, the less sure he was of it.

The DarkClan tom, if he had any inclinations towards the same thoughts, did not give them away. His gaze returned to Condor.

"So, unfortunately, we have no choice but to kill you for trespassing."

The DarkClan cats moved so quickly Dewpaw lost sight of them within the span of a blink. The force that hit him sent him flying and hitting the fence at his back. The grey tabby on top of him bared his teeth, sinking his head lower to Dewpaw's face. The grey trainee struggled, yowling pitifully as the tabby's claws pierced his shoulders.

This is it, he thought, *this is how I die*. Cinderblossom's face flashed through his mind. Still, the tom's head moved closer to his

throat.

But the DarkClan tom moved past his throat and instead whispered in his ear.

"Are they alright? Tell me that Lightpaw and Beetlepaw are alive."

Dewpaw, mouth dry, could only nod his head. The grey tabby seemed to relax.

"They're being treated well, fed?"

Again, Dewpaw nodded.

"Can you tell them... Tell them that Stormpaw said they shouldn't come back. That life is not worth living in DarkClan after they've had a taste of freedom. Can you do that?"

Dewpaw, taken completely by surprise by Stormpaw's request, croaked out a soft, "Yes." His reason for not trusting the two she-cats suddenly became apparent too: they hadn't been cast out of DarkClan, they were spying on the rebels.

Stormpaw nodded his head, pulling back from Dewpaw's head.

"I'm so sorry about this, but I need to stay alive too," Stormpaw said, his voice genuinely apologetic. Before Dewpaw could ask, he felt a searing pain in his shoulder as the grey tabby ran his claws down it, carving a path down into his chest.

Screeching in pain, Dewpaw battered the grey tabby with his back leg, who jumped back off of him.

"Run," Stormpaw hissed at him, reaching out to rake his claws across Dewpaw's face. "You can't win this fight." The rebel trainee blocked the blow and turned tail, leaping for the top of the fence. His shoulder burned as he pulled himself up, single back leg of very little use. The blood from his wound stained the wooden slats.

"Retreat!" came Gannet's muffled howl, jumping up onto the fence beside Dewpaw. Grasped tightly in his jaws was the scruff of

an injured Hazel. Her eyes were half-open, blood streaming from the deep wounds in her side and stomach.

Shard and Condor followed, both breathing heavily. The patrol took off at a run. Dewpaw pushed past the pain, the adrenaline of being followed spurring him forward.

When they were certain they had outrun the DarkClan patrol, the rebels slowed down. Gannet, who must have joined in the fight when he'd returned to the meeting point, was the least injured. Shard had a set of claw marks on his right side and a deep bite on his back leg. Condor's pelt was matted with blood, making it difficult to see where it was coming from. When he turned his head, Dewpaw gasped at the claw marks criss-crossing his face; thankfully, his single good eye was still in place.

"We need to get back to camp quickly," Condor breathed out, whisking his tail at Hazel weakly. "She won't make it if we do."

Gannet picked Hazel back up, who gave out a moan of pain, and the injured patrol continued on.

Sprucetail met them before they made it back to camp, Bronco at her side.

"We smelled the blood, what happened?" she asked, taking them in.

Gannet rushed right past her, carrying Hazel straight to the medics. Bronco followed, leaving Sprucetail to question the remaining patrol members.

"We were marking the border," Condor said, swaying slightly. "A DarkClan patrol approached us. It was that Smoketalon you'd told us about, he was the leader of the patrol. There were two ginger warriors with him, and two male trainees."

"Newtfang and Flamestrike, most probably," Sprucetail said, filling in the gaps. "Stormpaw and Antpaw were likely the apprentices."

"Stormpaw let me go," Dewpaw said quickly before they could

continue. "He told me he was sorry before he attacked me."

The older cats froze, staring at the trainee.

"Did he say anything else?" Sprucetail asked breathlessly.

"He asked me to give a message to Lightpaw and Beetlepaw," Dewpaw continued before stopping short. If he told Sprucetail all he'd heard, she would know Lightpaw and Beetlepaw were spies. If they couldn't stay here, and Stormpaw was telling them not to return to DarkClan, where would they go?

Dewpaw squared his shoulders. That was not his problem to face.

"He told me to tell them they shouldn't come back." He expected Sprucetail to have some sort of reaction, but the black she-cat remained still. "He said that life is not worth living in DarkClan."

For a moment, he thought Sprucetail had frozen with shock. Then, her eyes glinted with pride.

"Perhaps we have more of an advantage over DarkClan than we thought," she said.

It was Condor who stepped forward, livid. "Are we just going to ignore the fact that those two she-cats are clearly spying on us for DarkClan?" His voice grew weaker but his anger was apparent.

Sprucetail nodded. "I've known for some time, as have others. We have our own spies in the DarkClan camp who have been feeding us information."

Condor stared at her incredulously. "What if this information gets out? What if DarkClan learns of our weaknesses because of them?"

The she-cat's eyes narrowed. "Are you challenging my decisions as a leader?"

Dewpaw watched in amazement as the tom, larger than Sprucetail, shrank back.

"I learned something as well," Shard said quietly, looking

between the two cats. Sprucetail flicked her ear at him but kept her gaze on Condor.

"In between blows Smoketalon let slip that DarkClan had other spies in the camp," the former gang cat continued. "Someone who had been here before Lightpaw and Beetlepaw showed up, someone who had gained our trust."

Sprucetail was now on high alert. "Do you have any idea who it might be?"

Shard shook his head. "No, I couldn't bait it out of him."

But the gears in Dewpaw's mind were suddenly turning. He thought of Gannet helping Hazel and play-fighting with Beetlepaw. He'd changed since being in the camp, become friendlier and more trustworthy. It would also make sense if Shard was protecting him – they were, after all, both former junkyard cats.

Yet, why would Shard have brought up a spy at all if it was someone he cared for? That left the only option to be anyone else who had joined before the rebels annexed the Junkyard Gang.

And the only cat who had joined their group before was...

"Killian," Dewpaw and Sprucetail said at the same time. His eyes met hers and the anguish in them took him aback.

"I'll deal with him before the attack," she said. "In the meantime, do not tell anyone what you have learned. He needs to be unaware of our knowledge."

The patrol nodded their heads respectfully before heading for the medic's den.

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Dewpaw woke in the middle of the night with a start. His shoulder and chest felt stiff, the cobwebs and poultice of herbs having hardened. Crowpaw had looked them all over once and returned with the appropriate herbs within a heartbeat, much to the approval of Mothpelt.

Hazel lay not far from him, her breathing ragged. Gannet slept next to her, though he had been allowed to leave the den because of his lack of life-threatening injuries. Condor and Shard had been patched up too, but lay closer to the front of the den.

There was one more cat lying next to him, Dewpaw realized, and he rolled over slightly to catch a glimpse. The grey fur caught him off-guard but the cat did not awaken.

It was Cinderblossom.

Suddenly, the guilt of not having yet spoken to her caught up with him. Perhaps Robin had been right and he needed to get this off of his chest before it was too late.

Cinderblossom slept on peacefully and Dewpaw, not wanting to wake her, decided he would speak with her in the morning. He drifted off into a restless sleep, images of Killian, Lightpaw, and Beetlepaw turning them all in one by one filling his head.

When he woke at dawn Cinderblossom was already gone.

// chapter 32 //

There was only darkness around her – no sight, no smell, no sound. She ran through it, feeling nothing but her own heartbeat. It raced, as if she were being chased, pounding through her with every step.

Suddenly, bright light hit her and her speed increased. She felt the wind combing through her fur, the sounds of crows cawing overhead. The smell of blood hit her and she stopped, pinning her ears back. There were footsteps coming from behind her and she whirled around, unsheathing her claws.

His golden eyes met hers and she realized this was not the first time she'd had this dream. The white rims narrowed and he circled her, fangs flashing. She tensed, the instinct to kill rising within her.

"Nightchaser," she snarled.

"Always chasing the dark," he hissed back. "But what is it that you're chasing? What is it that you seek?"

"I seek revenge," she roared, leaping forwards. She landed where he had been moments before, but the black tom had disappeared. Instead, she found herself face to face with a small tabby, his copper eyes bright.

"Is it?" Reedpaw asked softly.

Her eyes widened. "Reedpaw?"

The tabby nodded sadly. "What is it that you seek?" he asked again.

"I seek..." Her mind searched for the proper words. "I seek justice."

He tilted his head, considering her answer. "Do you truly?"

She looked around at the scenery, the forest before her and the moors at her back. They stood in the heart of DarkClan territory, yet she did not feel at home. The sunlight bathing them began to

dim until the cold wind picked up and she shivered. She longed for the sun to return.

"I seek the light," she finally said.

This time, Reedpaw bared his teeth in a grin. "Don't lose your path."

When Lightpaw woke, she could still feel his nose pressed to her own, and remembered the exact shade of copper of his eyes.

The world outside was bathed in sunlight, much like in her dream, and Lightpaw got to her paws, though every inch of her longed to remain in her nest. There would be more training today, undoubtedly, and more grief as she remembered Reedpaw and Yewpaw and all those she had left behind in DarkClan, who she may not ever see again. Sprucetail knew about their spying and, after being confronted by her, Lightpaw knew she and Beetlepaw did not stand a chance if they were to run.

Do I even want to run? Lightpaw found herself thinking as she emerged from her den. If she returned she would be forced to lead a life of no emotion, to mate with a cat chosen by Dawnstar, and to live out her days as a cold-blooded killer. Here, at least, she was free to do as she pleased; train, hunt, speak with all members of the makeshift camp. There was a hierarchy, but it was loose in comparison to DarkClan's rigid structure.

And, most of all, that feeling of fear she'd often felt back in the DarkClan camp simply did not exist. Now that her paranoia at being discovered had eased, Lightpaw found herself much more relaxed.

"Off to training," Flea said as she passed by. "Would you like to walk with us?" Penny nodded enthusiastically from her side.

"Sure," Lightpaw replied, brightening considerably. Perhaps some more training would help her focus her thoughts.

When they arrived at the usual training spot, she was surprised to see Dewpaw already there. He'd been on the patrol last night and had run in to Smoketalon. Though she had not seen Hazel's injuries, Lightpaw knew the DarkClan patrol would not have taken it easy on

her.

Jaystrike, Roxanne, Killian, and Sprucetail sat waiting for the rest of the trainees to arrive. Lightpaw noticed that Sprucetail seemed to be keeping her distance from all of them; Jaystrike gazed at her longingly and Killian shifted ever closer to her. Roxanne looked slightly dejected, but listened to Jaystrike attentively whenever he spoke. Something about the arrangement reminded Lightpaw of Webpaw and Hazel whenever Leo was around.

"I never thought I'd see someone pining after a she-cat so obviously," Webpaw said in an undertone, joining them. Without Hazel, who she usually followed around, Lightpaw supposed she had nowhere else to go.

Olive furrowed her brows. "Don't be mean, Jaystrike's one of the sweetest toms in the camp."

"Not to mention your own pining after Leo is quite obvious," Beetlepaw cut in, throwing a pointed look at Webpaw. The grey she-cat bared her fangs but did not say anything more.

Flea shrugged. "At least he's not being quite so obvious as you and Gannet are." Lightpaw thought she had never seen Beetlepaw so embarrassed and positioned herself to protect Flea, just in case.

"Enough chatting," Sprucetail called. "I'm here today to see how far you've come in your training." From her tone, Lightpaw knew she was here to check if they were ready to battle DarkClan. The doubt in her that the trainees would ever stand a chance against DarkClan rose again.

Lightpaw found herself opposite Dewpaw. Her back legs twinged with the ghost of pain as she remembered how he'd taken them out from beneath her the day Nightchaser killed Reedpaw. She would have to take special care to prevent it from happening again.

As they started their mock fight, she found herself tiring much more quickly than usual when fighting Dewpaw. His blows were better-timed and more matched to hers. Once or twice, she found herself slipping up and nearly letting him past her defences. She managed

to land a couple of blows on his sides, but never close enough to anything that would be considered lethal in battle.

And then, even though she'd promised herself to watch out for his trick, Lightpaw found herself on the ground with her paws wiped out from beneath her. She felt his weight on top of her.

"I fought Stormpaw at the border," Dewpaw said before Lightpaw could fight back. The she-cat froze.

"S-Stormpaw? Is he okay?"

"He told me to pass on a message," Dewpaw continued. "He told me you shouldn't return to DarkClan. That life is not worth living there once you've had a taste of freedom."

Lightpaw's eyes widened. The thoughts she'd had earlier returned and she acutely felt that lack of fear once more. It intensified as she realized Dewpaw, too, knew her secret.

With his weight lifted, she dazedly got to her paws. For the first time, she registered the wound on his shoulder with clarity and realized Stormpaw must have injured him.

"I'm sorry you had to fight him," she said.

"He was sorry he had to fight me too," Dewpaw replied with a twitch of his whiskers. "I think he would have left with us if he'd had the choice."

Lightpaw shook her head. "He wouldn't leave Rainpaw behind." *Not the way I left Reedpaw behind.*

Something in Dewpaw changed. Lightpaw couldn't quite place whether it was his stance, his expression, or the light in his eyes, but suddenly, it felt as if he was seeing her in a completely different light. As if, somehow, knowing Stormpaw wouldn't leave his friend behind gave the cats of DarkClan a conscience and, by extension, made Lightpaw less terrible in his eyes.

"I'm not seeing very much training over here," Sprucetail said dryly, eyeing the two of them.

Lightpaw opened her mouth to respond, but Dewpaw beat her to it. "My shoulder started feeling very stiff and Lightpaw offered to ease up on me. Turns out she's not so bad." He looked over at the tortoiseshell, an almost conspiratory twinkle in his eye.

Sprucetail twitched her whiskers. "It's great that you're getting along but we need to be ready for – "

She was cut short as a frazzled Mira burst into the training area, white fur standing on end. Immediately, everyone froze.

"DarkClan," she managed to gasp out. "They – they're getting ready to attack. They've had a spy here the whole time."

Lightpaw's eyes met Beetlepaw's. The confusion in them mirrored her own; neither of them had passed on any information. She felt more than saw Dewpaw's gaze harden, that newly earned trust disappearing in a heartbeat.

Sprucetail, surprisingly, did not look at either Lightpaw or Beetlepaw. "I know who it is. Roxanne, Bronco, Jaystrike, with me. Lightpaw, Dewpaw, I leave you in charge of getting the trainees back safely."

The older cats disappeared, leaving Lightpaw frozen in shock. Dewpaw's defensive stance had not changed, nor had the distrusting stares of the other trainees around her.

"Was it you?" Dewpaw hissed softly.

Lightpaw met his eyes, shaking her head, willing him to believe her.

"It wasn't us," Beetlepaw backed her up as the other trainees closed in around them. "You just saw Sprucetail run out, claiming to know who it is. If it was us she would have stayed."

"Why should we trust you?" Webpaw snarled. "For all we know, DarkClan never ran you out. Maybe Sprucetail's too blind to see what's under her own nose."

Lightpaw looked at Beetlepaw, wondering what was going through her littermate's head. For the first time she wished they were closer,

that they could read each other well enough to pull through. Beetlepaw's questioning look seemed to wish the same thing.

The tortoiseshell cleared her throat, turning to the trainees. Beetlepaw followed her lead, standing proud and strong. Perhaps it was finally time to come clean. If DarkClan really was planning an attack they needed these cats to trust them.

"We admit: we were sent here by DarkClan," Lightpaw said quietly. Some of the trainees gasped. It took all Lightpaw had not to look away from the disgust in Crisp's face, or the hurt in Oats' eyes. Flea and Penny backed away from her, filling Lightpaw's chest with pain.

"We were sent here to spy as part of our warrior assessment," Beetlepaw continued. "We thought it was an honour, that it made us important. The truth is, Dawnstar would have killed us if we had refused."

The truth in Beetlepaw's words jolted through Lightpaw. "In fact, she almost killed our own littermate when he returned from his failed assessment." This time, she looked at Dewpaw. His hard gaze had softened slightly. Webpaw still looked defensive, though some understanding had filled her face; something in Flea had changed too.

"We had every intention of returning to DarkClan," she confessed. "But the two moons we have spent here..."

She looked over at Beetlepaw, wondering if her littermate felt the same way. If, after the time spent with the rebels, she, too, had realized just how limiting their life in DarkClan had been and how terrible it was to live in fear.

"The two moons we've spent here have been the best I've ever had," Beetlepaw finally said. "And neither I, nor Lightpaw, would do anything to hurt anyone here."

"Not after the battle training together," – Lightpaw looked from Webpaw to Dewpaw – "or the trust," – from Oats to Crisp – "or the friendship." – from Flea to Penny.

"We can't go back there – we *won't* go back there," Beetlepaw finished. "We're going to stand beside you in this fight, even if it costs us everything."

None of the trainees said anything for a long time.

Then, Dewpaw stepped forward. "I believe you."

"Me too," Flea said.

"I do as well," Olive replied.

Lightpaw let out a sigh of relief, as did Beetlepaw beside her.

"But what do we do?" a worried Finch said. "We're nowhere near ready to take on DarkClan." Some of the trainees nodded in agreement, the fear spreading through their ranks quickly.

Beetlepaw stepped up. "Their numbers are smaller than our own and we've learned how to work together; I cannot say the same of DarkClan. Partner up, keep each others' backs. Split their attention and take them on in packs. DarkClan's skills may be better but, if we combine our strengths, we have a much better chance of defeating them."

The trainees were now nodding along, taking Beetlepaw's advice to heart. Even Lightpaw found herself inspired by her littermate's words.

"There are others in DarkClan who don't believe in the way Dawnstar treats the Clan," Lightpaw continued. "Some of those cats are on our side too – Thistleshade, Oakshade, Stormpaw, Rainpaw, and more."

"We stand more than just a fighting chance," Beetlepaw crowed. "So who's with us?"

They were racing back to camp within moments, the idea of battle filling their heads and blood pulsing hot with the desire to fight beneath their pelts.

// chapter 33 //

The trainees arrived in camp breathing hard from their run. The cold air stung Dewpaw's lungs as it rushed in and out but, for some reason, he had never felt more alive. He slid his gaze sideways at Lightpaw and Beetlepaw, who seemed more determined than ever to prove themselves. He hoped, with some anxiety, that his support of them wouldn't be the rebels' downfall.

His fur rose as he stepped into the camp and witnessed the scene before him. Sprucetail looked three times her usual size, her eyes filled with rage and her lip curled in a snarl. Before her, trembling, lay a dark tabby tom.

"We took you in," she snarled. "You *fought* me to get our acceptance and have us let you stay. You were an integral part of our camp, a hunter for when we needed feeding and a fighter when we needed more cats to help our trainees. And you repay us with *this*?"

The mewling sounds coming out of Killian were unlike anything Dewpaw had ever heard before. He had had his suspicions about the tom, especially after overhearing him speaking to Gannet, but seeing the tom reduced to a cowardly shivering mass still came as a surprise.

Across the camp, Gannet seemed just as confused. Cinderblossom's eyes were narrowed with a mixture of hurt and scorn, Beaver's tail resting across her shoulders to comfort her. Bronco watched the proceedings with a grim face; Nightchaser lay with his head on his paws, watching at the proceedings with mild curiosity.

"How long have you been spying on us?" Sprucetail hissed.

"I haven't been for at least two moons now, I swear," Killian mewled pitifully.

The she-cat whisked her tail angrily. "I didn't ask you how long you haven't been spying on us. I asked you how long you *were*."

"I came to you as a spy," Killian said quietly. "But I haven't been for moons now, I swear it!"

Dewpaw thought back to the night Killian first joined them, the night Dewpaw had been backed against a fence with a dog staring him straight in the eyes, waiting for its killing blow. Had Killian saved him only to win the rebels' trust? If not for Killian's mission, would that dog have killed Dewpaw?

And the stories Killian told him about his crippled littermate – had they been real? Or was his every interaction with the tom a lie?

Dewpaw remembered seeing the tabby at the border on his hunting trips, but never had he thought to question him about his motives. He had been too preoccupied with Killian getting closer than he was comfortable with to Cinderblossom.

And the last time he'd seen Killian at the border was the same day Nightchaser came into camp injured, not even a half moon prior...

"He's lying," Dewpaw said before he could stop himself.

The trainees looked at each other, having been the only ones to hear him.

"He's lying," Dewpaw said again, louder. This time, Sprucetail looked up.

"I saw him at the border while I was hunting on the same day Nightchaser killed Reedpaw," Dewpaw said.

"I was hunting." Killian's amber eyes bore into Dewpaw and the trainee's fur grew hot with the hatred in them.

"I saw him at the border only a moon ago too," Beaver said, stepping forward. "He looked to be biding his time, holding a mouse down by its tail and playing with it instead of killing it."

"I've seen him there too," Condor said.

"I, too," Indigo added.

Killian looked frightened once more as Sprucetail drew herself up again.

"I won't kill you," she assured him. "But you are never again welcome within our ranks. The lies you have fed us make you unworthy of our trust, and trust is what we need most now that uniting against DarkClan is imminent."

"So what are you going to do with me?" Killian spat, some of his old fire returning. He drew himself up too, tail lashing.

Sprucetail sprang, toppling him over, and brought her paw down, claws unsheathed, on his striped tail as he struggled to get away. "Go, and never return," she said coldly. "In fact, why don't you run and tell DarkClan that we're coming for them."

She let go of his tail and Killian hesitated only a moment before doing a quick sweep of the camp and breaking into a run.

The sky was beginning to darken, dark clouds rolling in over the camp.

"We need to move now," Sprucetail said, turning to Bronco. "If he isn't working for DarkClan anymore, which I highly doubt, then we'll have the element of surprise. If not he'll go running straight to them."

Bronco nodded, stepping up beside her.

"Alley cats, rebels, Junkyard Gang," he addressed everyone. "For moons we have lived alongside each other, trying to get by as DarkClan – the Marked – threatened our very existence. They mean to wipe us out, if given the chance, and we cannot live in fear any longer."

A vibrating energy had settled around Dewpaw at Bronco's words, an itching in his paws. Though his heart pounded in fear, he found it ebbing as the energy flowed through him from claws to tail.

"Tonight is the night we get rid of the Marked forever," Gannet said, stepping forward as well. "Tonight is the night we leave this life behind and build a new one."

Into the circle stepped the small figure of Mothpelt. "The prophecy says DarkClan will be defeated on the darkest of nights. How can we be sure tonight is that night?"

Both Bronco and Gannet wavered in their confidence, glancing between each other. As a unit they turned to Sprucetail for explanation.

The she-cat, when she spoke, kept her eyes trained on Nightchaser. "We can't be sure. What I do know, though, is that Nightchaser has never been darker than he is now."

The black tom lifted his head off of his paws slightly, eyes flashing. Dewpaw shivered, remembering the insanity that had lit them the day Nightchaser killed Reedpaw. If darkness could be described as an action, killing another would be a dark action indeed.

"Together," Sprucetail said, nodding to both Bronco and Gannet.

With a flick of their tails, they rounded up the entire camp, Dewpaw among them. The river of pelts swept through the camp entrance, up and over fences, through the skeletons of undergrowth and drifts of cold snow. The vibrating energy spread through them all, a thrumming chord to which their paws hit the frozen ground.

Dewpaw found himself beside Cinderblossom as he ran, all thought of his crippled back leg forgotten. He had to keep up, he had to be part of the downfall of DarkClan.

Yet, when Cinderblossom looked over at him with fear in her eyes, he wondered if he was ready to battle some of the strongest cats he had ever seen.

"I'm sorry," he said, panting slightly.

"Me too," she said, pressing closer. "I'm sorry you thought I was ashamed of you."

Dewpaw shook his head. "I've seen my father, I know he's not someone you would have wanted kits with." His eyes travelled further up, to where Beaver glanced back every so often at the two

of them.

Cinderblossom sighed. "You're my kit too, and you always will be."

For a moment, Dewpaw felt the guilt of not having forgiven Cinderblossom sooner, of not having more time with her before the battle that now seemed much too close.

And, just like that, high stones appeared before them, looking ominous in the wintry half-light. Atop them stood the silhouettes of cats, more than Dewpaw could count before a weight hit his side.

He rolled out of the way and sprang back upright to see a grey tabby she-cat facing him, poised to pounce. Dewpaw would have moved to defend himself, had he not suddenly found himself frozen. Half of the she-cat's face was missing, as if she had been mauled by some sort of animal.

"What are you staring at?" she hissed.

She sprang and Dewpaw realized she would hit him if he didn't move. He dodged, catching her side as she sailed past. No sooner had her paws hit the ground than she was in the air again, turning in mid-air as she jumped over his head and dealt a blow to his ears.

Dewpaw felt fear rise in him. He had never seen that move, let alone so perfectly executed. Were all of the DarkClan cats this well-trained?

The next time she came at him, he used the one move he knew she hadn't seen before. With a swing of his back leg he took her legs out from underneath her. She fell in a heap and he raised his claws to deal a blow to her sides and back.

Another shape pushed him out of the way, taking the she-cat's blow for her. Dewpaw fell to the ground dazed.

"Rainpaw, are you alright?" he heard his attacker say. The she-cat gave a muffled response.

Dewpaw climbed to his paws and found a familiar grey tabby tom before him.

"I'm sorry," the tom said, as he had before, before his claws pierced into Dewpaw's shoulder. The trainee let out a screech and plunged forward, paws aimed at the tabby's chest.

"Stormpaw, cut it out!" A blur of cream, blue, and white toppled the DarkClan cat over.

"Lightpaw?" Stormpaw's eyes widened in surprise.

"We're fighting against DarkClan now," Lightpaw told him. "You told me I needed to get out, but we can't do that if DarkClan is still around. And I'm not leaving without taking you with me."

Stormpaw's looked between the two of them, surprise evident.

"Are you with us or against us?" Lightpaw said, voice calm even as shrieks and yowls rose into the air around them.

"I'm with you," the grey tabby said decidedly. "Rainpaw is too."

The pale tortoiseshell nodded her head before disappearing into the throng of cats.

Dewpaw didn't wait to see what Stormpaw would do. To his left were a couple of the former gang cats teaming up against DarkClan fighters twice their size; to his right alley cats spitting and hissing at their rivals. Up ahead, he saw Cinderblossom and Beaver battling a ginger tabby.

A high-pitched shriek rang out and Dewpaw directed his footsteps towards it, blocking out the rest of his surroundings. Through the fighting cats around him he could see a grey pelt, almost identical to his own, and, under it's owner's paws, a brown tabby and white she-cat.

"Dewpaw, help!" Robin screeched as their eyes met. Her voice became muffled as the grey DarkClan cat brought his paws down over her face.

Dewpaw's back leg felt much heavier as he struggled to reach the two fighting cats. He suddenly had an overwhelming need to save Robin, to get to her before all breath left her body. He realized he'd

been avoiding her in the last moon, always afraid she would push him to speak to Cinderblossom – even though, now that he had, he wished he'd done it sooner. If he saved her, he knew he would spend moons apologizing for his actions.

He leapt, forepaws aimed at the grey tom's sides, but his back leg threatened to pull him back down to the earth. If he fell, Robin would surely be dead. So he pulled the weight of his back leg forward, hitting the DarkClan cat's body with the side of his own, and all of the dead weight he'd cursed for so long.

It wasn't a hard hit, but enough to make the tom stumble and release Robin from his claws. A gasp sounded from below but Dewpaw couldn't afford the distraction of making sure she was safe. He was now facing a very angry DarkClan cat much larger than himself.

"You're going to regret that," the tom snarled.

"I'm never going to regret saving a friend from my own father," Dewpaw snarled back, pouncing. He hit the DarkClan cat straight in the chest and rolled underneath him, keeping his claws unsheathed as he went. He felt them tear through fur and skin, though he wasn't sure what exactly he'd hit. As he pushed forward, he took the tom's back legs out from underneath him.

He got to his paws, feeling a surge of triumph.

It disappeared when he saw the tom's flashing claws driving forward straight into his own chest.

"A cripple is no son of mine."

And then all he saw was the black, black sky.

// chapter 34 //

Lightpaw had been training for over half of her life for this very moment. She had trained with DarkClan's best and the rebels' best, fighting formidable fighters on both sides. Even that had not prepared her for what she encountered now.

The two forces clashed, fighting breaking out faster than lightning travelled across the sky. Lightpaw kept running, unsure where to make her first move. In training, she knew who she was fighting – here, it could be anyone.

She stopped short when she saw Finch struggling under Newtfang's weight. The ginger DarkClan tom had the trainee pinned by the shoulders, jaws moving ever closer to his throat. Finch managed to swipe at Newtfang's face, but his attack did little to free him. For a moment, their pelts turned to black, and Lightpaw remembered seeing Beetlepaw pinned beneath Jet.

Then, she realized that Newtfang meant to kill Finch.

She spurred herself forward, willing her paws to move faster. She had vowed to fight for the rebels, to turn her back on DarkClan; if she revealed herself as a traitor by saving the life of an alley cat then both sides would know where she stood.

Her paws connected with Newtfang's side forcefully, throwing him off of Finch. The ginger tom rolled, surprise showing on his bloodied face. A scrap of brown fur hung from the side of his jaws.

Lightpaw turned to see the blank, staring eyes of the cat she'd meant to save.

"Lightpaw," Newtfang said, eyes narrowed. "How nice to have you back. I've been keeping watch."

The she-cat stared at him, suddenly remembering the times she had entered Dawnstar's den to see him and Shadowpelt speaking

with her. Had they been following the rebels' movements all along?

"Seems you turned on us some while ago," he continued. "You weren't the only spies in that camp, you know."

Killian. Newtfang and Shadowpelt had been reporting Killian's observations to Dawnstar.

Lightpaw rolled out of the way just as Newtfang sprang. Her claws were unsheathed and she was prepared to fight – but who? Whose side was she really on? She didn't want to kill anyone, not if she could help it.

"Kill them all!" The voice echoed around the High Stones, as cold and poisonous as ever. Looking up, Lightpaw saw Dawnstar standing atop the Speaking Rock. Hatred filled her belly at the sight of the DarkClan leader and red tinged her vision.

If there was one cat she *would* kill, it was Dawnstar.

She dodged Newtfang's next attack with ease before bringing her own paws down his right side. He yowled in pain, rounding on her. His next blow connected with her shoulder, then the side of her face. Slightly dazed, Lightpaw moved back, trying to reestablish her control.

He leapt over her but she whipped around too quickly, blocking his next swipe. Before she could hit him again, a black blur threw her to the side, pinning her to the ground.

"What are you doing?!" Shademask yelled at her. "He's on our side!"

The worried look in his eyes eased some of Lightpaw's shock. Shademask, however, didn't know the truth.

She steeled herself, narrowing her eyes. "But I'm not."

The surprise registered on his face and she threw him off of her, reversing their positions. Now, she had him pinned down and at her mercy.

"You can't win!" Shademask said. "All of the rebels will die."

"DarkClan is outnumbered," Lightpaw replied. "It can't continue to exist. You yourself said this is all about Dawnstar getting her claws on Nightchaser, that no one else matters. You don't matter to her, to DarkClan."

Shademask conviction wavered. "I – I don't know – "

"Fight for us, help us be the reason why DarkClan doesn't win this time," Lightpaw continued, her pleading tone evident even to her. "You matter to the rebels, to me."

He considered her words for a moment, warring with himself. The light in his eyes shifted back and forth, first dark then light.

"Seek the light," she said, remembering the dream in which Reedpaw came to her. "Follow the light."

Shademask looked her straight in the eyes, green orbs suddenly clear. "I'd follow you anywhere."

Lightpaw felt her pelt grow warm and her heart flutter, but now was not the time for that. She touched her nose to Shademask's, hoping both of them would make it out of this battle alive.

But another thought filled her at his words: *seek the light*, she thought, *and the darkest of nights*. If Nightchaser was the night, was it possible she was the light that would bring the end of DarkClan?

Dawnstar still stood on the Speaking Rock, surveying the fighting all around her. Lightpaw grit her fangs, eyes narrowed. DarkClan's leader needed to be brought down, no matter the cost.

The sound of battle and feeling of jostling bodies around her faded away as she moved, eyes set on only one target. Her breathing was steady, her pawsteps purposeful, and her goal clearly in mind.

You will terrorize us no longer, Lightpaw thought.

All thoughts flew from her as she noticed Nightchaser before her,

pinned beneath Flamestrike – his littermate. She moved quickly – she had already seen one cat die today on her watch – and bowled Flamestrike over just as his fangs moved to kill.

"Lightpaw!" Flamestrike screeched. His eyes flicked once between her and Nightchaser and understanding filled him.

"Why are you helping him?" the DarkClan tom said through clenched fangs.

"Because I believe him," Lightpaw replied. "I believe that we can live in a world where there is no senseless killing, where the Clan takes care of each other, where we don't have to life in fear."

Flamestrike's eyes shifted to Dawnstar for a moment. When he was again focussed on Lightpaw, he fell into a defensive stance.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Flamestrike growled. "You've been brainwashed into thinking the rebels are right."

Lightpaw mirrored him. "No, Flamestrike, *you've* been raised to believe that DarkClan is the only way of life there is. Let me show you a different one."

She stared at him, imploring him to believe her. She knew that if Flamestrike decided to attack her, she had a slim chance of survival. He was too strong for her, and too experienced.

Follow the light, follow the light, she chanted in her head, reaching out with the thoughts as if to touch those around her.

Then, over Flamestrike's shoulder, she saw Nightchaser locked in battle with Dawnstar. His shoulder was bleeding heavily, and there was a large gash in his stomach. He appeared to be losing a lot of blood and each of his swipes grew weaker as she watched. She hated him for what he had done to Reedpaw; but she hated Dawnstar more.

"We need to help him," Lightpaw breathed, already moving to help.

Flamestrike blocked her path, fangs dangerously close to her

throat. The pale tortoiseshell froze, unsure what he meant to do.

"You win this time," he whispered in her ear, a hint of amusement to his voice. For a moment, Lightpaw was taken back to their training sessions, when she finally managed to pin him down and win their mock fight.

"Thank you," she breathed. They were off in a heartbeat, aiming for the rock upon which Dawnstar and Nightchaser fought. They leapt together, claws extended and fangs flashing.

Lightpaw landed pawsteps away from the DarkClan leader, but when she looked to her side Flamestrike was nowhere to be found. A terrible shriek sounded and, down below, Flamestrike's body hit the ground with a sickening crack. Smoketalon's hazel eyes met hers, glinting savagely.

In the same moment, Dawnstar and Nightchaser rolled off of the stone, a blur of light and dark. They burst apart as they hit the ground, Smoketalon rushing to Dawnstar's side.

Lightpaw watched in horror as they stalked towards Nightchaser, Flamestrike's unconscious body between them.

"Not the darkest night, is it?" Dawnstar hissed, voice betraying her delight. All around, DarkClan cats continued to fight.

"But it is," Nightchaser said calmly, flicking a tail to the sky.

As the DarkClan cats looked upwards, Dawnstar locked eyes with Lightpaw. A cruel grin spread across her face.

Before Lightpaw could move, Dawnstar had her throat seized in her jaws.

"You make one move and she dies," Dawnstar hissed at Nightchaser. The black tom, who Lightpaw had never seen show emotion other than insanity, suddenly looked afraid.

"Take me instead," Nightchaser said.

Dawnstar shook her head and Lightpaw groaned as the

movement tore her skin. Her breathing was rapidly becoming shallow and she felt light-headed. It hit her that Dawnstar – her own mother – meant to kill her.

"I think Lightpaw will do nicely." She sneered, fangs tightening around Lightpaw's neck.

"Over my dead body."

Through the haze settling over her eyes, Lightpaw saw two cats arrive, both black. One took on Smoketalon with ease; the other hit Dawnstar straight on. She felt herself lifted up, and then she was falling down and down.

Nightchaser broke her fall. Not far off, Sprucetail exchanged blows with Smoketalon. On their other side, Lightpaw saw her rescuer, Spiderthorn, lock his jaws around Dawnstar's throat. Her heart jumped into her mouth as Dawnstar twisted, her fangs hitting Spiderthorn's neck.

"Father, no!" she screamed, Nightchaser's voice joining her own.

It happened so quickly she was not sure it happened at all. One moment, two cats stood locked in a death match. Then, there were two bodies on the ground, pelts splattered with each other's blood.

Lightpaw's surroundings seemed to slow. The frenzy of before melted away and she felt herself moving forward, paws numb. Around her, the sound of claws tearing through fur was nothing more than a bird's wings cutting through air. The screeches and yowls stopped short as everyone became aware of what had happened.

"Dawnstar is dead," Sprucetail said quietly, as if not believing the truth of it. Nightchaser, who had padded over to the DarkClan leader's limp body, nodded his confirmation.

"Dawnstar is dead!" Sprucetail said more loudly. The words travelled through the gathered cats, growing louder and louder until the entire rebel force was chanting them.

Lightpaw did not move, shock keeping her grounded. A gentle

tail rested on her shoulders and she looked over to see Shademask, his green eyes clouded with grief. She let herself slump against him as the grief took over and her took her weight without question.

Slowly, everyone was gathering around the bodies of Spiderthorn and Dawnstar. Whispers travelled through the crowd, forming a single question: which side had Spiderthorn been on?

Lightpaw herself did not know, not truly. She could only assume that he had been on the side that protected his family at all costs. Her eyes travelled up to meet Beetlepaw's and saw her sorrow mirrored there. To think that only a couple of moons ago the two of them had hardly been able to agree on anything. With some sadness, she remembered Spiderthorn's advice to her all those moons ago: *I can't fight your battle with her for you but I can give you every bit of wisdom I have.*

But, in the end, it had been a battle he'd fought for her, and one he'd died for.

The bodies of the others who had died in the battle were moved to rest next to Dawnstar and Spiderthorn, eight total. Mira's white fur was splattered in red, Indigo's strange blue eyes bright even in death. Finch and Soren rested together, their littermates mourning next to them. DarkClan had also lost Duskwhisker and Newtfang.

"DarkClan has finally fallen," Sprucetail said, still sounding as if she didn't believe the words coming from her mouth.

"Spiderthorn was always a great warrior," Nightchaser said. "Whatever his motives, he saved us from Dawnstar and the plague that was DarkClan."

"He will have a place in StarClan," Mothpelt said quietly, stepping forward. With a soft paw, she closed the eyes of the fallen.

Lightpaw glanced up, but there were no stars visible. An inky blackness stretched out all around them. The darkest of nights.

"We must take care of our wounded," Bronco said. "But tomorrow..."

The gathered cats looked at each other. For a moment, no one was sure what tomorrow would bring.

"Tomorrow we build a new life," Shademask said, voice carrying over the crowd.

And Lightpaw knew they would. Together.

// epilogue //

Mothpelt walked between the High Stones peacefully, a feeling of lightness in her despite the events of the past half moon. It felt as if, with the death of Dawnstar, a darkness had been lifted. Since the battle, not so much as a squabble had broken out between the cats now residing at High Stones.

She knew this peace could not last forever, but she basked in it while it did. Tonight was the full moon and the night when they would be divided into the Clans of Old – RockClan, SeaClan, and MoorClan. Sootstar had come to her in a dream, naming the new leaders of these Clans. Those same cats would be returning any moment now from their journey to the Moonwaters.

Mothpelt stopped her rounds when she reached the old DarkClan medicine den. Memories of Cedarheart poked at the edges of her mind and some of the old grief welled up. She could only imagine how proud her old mentor would be of the rebels now.

"We're running out of cobwebs," Crowpaw said tiredly as he emerged from the den. Though they had found it well-stocked, by Reedpaw no doubt, treating the wounded had taken its toll on supplies.

"We'll send a small patrol to the forest to collect more," she assured him. He nodded and headed off dutifully to check on their patients. Mothpelt had no doubt he would make a fine medicine cat for any Clan he ended up in.

"How is Flamestrike doing?"

The worried voice of Cinderblossom was one Mothpelt had become accustomed to. First, her questions had been about Dewpaw, then Beaver, and then Flamestrike. All three toms had been heavily injured in the battle but, thankfully, were making full to near full recoveries. Even so, there was nothing Mothpelt could do about a broken leg.

"He will have to learn to fight without his back leg," she told Cinderblossom. "But if Dewpaw did it, who is to say Flamestrike can't?"

The grey warrior nodded her head in thanks. "We're really lucky to have you, Mothpelt. I don't think he would have survived without you. I don't think any of them would have."

Mothpelt flicked her tail, brushing the comment off modestly. "Lily and Crowpaw deserve credit too. I think we're lucky we didn't lose too many lives in the battle."

Still, the deaths had taken their toll on the members of the new Clans. Soren and Finch, especially, had left a mark on their littermates, Olive and Hazel. The two she-cats had been unable to sleep for nights on end before Mothpelt gave them herbs to soothe their shock and grief. Olive, she had noticed, had been finding support in Bramblefire who, like her, had lost his own littermate in the previous rebellion.

Some were still on edge, as some members of DarkClan had disappeared after Dawnstar's defeat. Skunknose, Shadowpelt, and Smoketalon were still out there somewhere, and the knowledge made Mothpelt, among others, uneasy. The other surviving members of DarkClan had begged for a chance to redeem themselves – Minkfur, Pigeonfang, and Dapplefrost because of the peaceful lives they wanted for their kits and the others because of their desire for freedom from DarkClan's rules.

"Sometimes, I still can't believe it's over," Cinderblossom said quietly. Mothpelt nodded; the freedom felt surreal.

Night was already beginning to fall and the excitement around High Stones was palpable. The last of the hunting patrols arrived, jaws filled with freshkill. Leafbare was slowly melting into newleaf and prey had been abundant as of late, almost as if the world was celebrating DarkClan's defeat.

Crowpaw retrieved a squirrel and offered to share it with Mothpelt. The two medics settled near the medicine den, sitting in a comfortable silence. Others had settled in groups all around the

Speaking Rock, waiting impatiently for their new leaders to arrive. They were mixed, today, rebels sharing tongues with former DarkClan cats and alley cats mixing with the former gang. They were united, stronger than ever before and, sadly, Mothpelt realized this might be the last time until the next full moon that they would be.

As a medicine cat, at least, she would still have some part in the lives of the other medicine cats.

"When it is decided which Clan you are to be part of," Mothpelt said, leaning closer to Crowpaw, "we will go to Moonwaters so you can receive your full name."

Crowpaw's eyes lit up. "Really? I've only been a medic's apprentice for a short period of time."

Mothpelt flicked her tail. "You have natural talent. After what the past half moon has put you through, I think you are ready. And, if you ever need my help, you can still ask for it. We medicine cats don't turn our backs on those in need."

The new leaders arrived out of breath, eager to begin the very first Gathering of the new Clans. Sprucetail – Sprucestar – jumped onto the Speaking Rock first, followed by Bronco and Gannet.

"I am Sprucestar of RockClan," she said loudly, pride evident in her voice.

"I am Gannetstar of SeaClan," the black and white tom beside her announced.

"And I am Tallstar of MoorClan," the former alley cat leader called.

"Together we will rebuild the Clans of Old," Sprucestar continued. "We have discussed with StarClan the division of the Clans but, in the end, it is each individual who decides where they wish to be."

And so, the division began. Sprucestar stepped aside to let Tallstar announce the members of MoorClan, then Gannetstar the members of SeaClan, before finally calling Mothpelt's own name in her appointment of RockClan's members.

"StarClan has chosen well," Mothpelt said off-handedly, observing as the scattered cats joined their respective leaders. Despite the assurance that they could choose a different Clan if they wished, not a single cat strayed.

"I hope you serve RockClan well," Crowpaw said, dipping his head to her.

Mothpelt nodded back. "And you MoorClan. Take care of Bramblefire for me, will you?" A small pang hit her chest as she saw her brown tabby littermate following Olive to the MoorClan group.

Crowpaw twitched his whiskers. "Of course. And you make sure Dewpaw stays out of trouble."

"I can only try," the she-cat replied. "Until tomorrow, then, and your naming ceremony."

"Goodbye," Crowpaw said simply before joining his new Clan.

Mothpelt moved to join her own when a black shape atop the Speaking Rock suddenly caught her eye. The white-rimmed eyes met hers and the black tom nodded.

"Your name wasn't called," Mothpelt said, approaching the tom. The dancing light had left his eyes, leaving behind the Nightchaser she remembered.

He twitched his whiskers sadly. "It is not in StarClan's plan for me to be part of the reborn Clans. I have done my part."

"But where will you go?" Mothpelt asked. Behind them, the new Clans were beginning to depart.

"Where all the others have gone," he replied, eyes flicking to the dark horizon. "My truth-telling has come to an end. It is now the duty of the medicine cats to communicate with StarClan, and pass on the warrior code to their Clans."

His eyes remained clouded but his pawsteps were sure as he moved past Mothpelt and off into a world covered by night.

Nightchaser, always chasing the night, she thought with a tinge of sadness.

By the time Mothpelt settled into her new den in the forest gorge and gazed up at the twinkling stars, she knew Nightchaser was gone, and that the Clans would wake to another day of peace.

// author's note //

[image] [image]

A big, big thank you to everyone who has stuck with me through the 1.5 years it took me to finish this book. In the last five weeks alone I've written nearly 30k words in order to finally finish Unmarked. Progress was slow, but looked a little something like this:

It's been a wild ride, but it's not quite over yet! Unmasked and Unmarked are being joined by another to create a trilogy. The next, and final, chapter in the lives of the rebels will take place in...

"Shademask remembers DarkClan all too well and is still tormented by the things he did under Dawnstar's reign. Though well-respected in the newly formed RockClan, he doubts his own worth and loyalty as a warrior - especially when the dead come to haunt him.

Skypaw knows of DarkClan only as an outsider, once a kittypet and now part of the reborn Clans. Her new life in SeaClan is exciting but dangerous, and the comforts of her old home prick at her memory. There are some who would want her back, leading her astray from her new allegiance.

Rosekit does not know of DarkClan at all, or the father who refuses to claim her as his own. Constantly overshadowed by her sister, she is not sure where her place in MoorClan is, or if there simply isn't one for her. Promises of safety and belonging may prove hard to reject if offered.

Though DarkClan has ceased to exist, its remnants continue to float beneath the surface, threatening to break the bonds being forged. There is a thin line between the darkness and the light, and the making of a new life and stirring up the ashes of the old."

So stay tuned!